ESTHER HILL'S SECRET.

VOL I.

ESTHER HILL'S SECRET.

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&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

"IF you please, ma'am," said Peggy, dropping a curtsey, "mother says you'll be glad to hear we've got a lodger."

"And who *is* the lodger, my dear?" asked Aunt Susan.

It was after sunset at the end of a hot day. The month was only May, but the weather had turned very warm, and the house was close, Aunt Susan thought: besides, she had got a little tired of listening to the talk of the young curate in the draw-

ing-room, and the fresh air felt pleasant after it. He was a very excellent young man—"but really I begin to wish he would not come so often, or that my brother was at home," thought Aunt Susan, lingering amongst her flowers, and giving a gentle sigh as she thought of the small troubles of her life, and of the follies of young people. Not that Gabrielle meant any harm—she was sure of that, but she was so young and pretty. "It all comes of that—of her being so very pretty," thought Aunt Susan gravely. "She can't help it, poor dear, of course,—but it is a real trial to those connected with her."

It was a country house, not very far from a provincial town (the town was Chester); a pleasant old house, set down on a big lawn, with a belt of flowers about it (the flowers

were just beginning to blow now, scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias putting forth their brilliant colours at the foot of the old walls), and round the lawn a line of noble beeches. "They are more than two hundred years old—the finest beeches that I know anywhere about," Mr. Dunstan would sometimes say with a loving pride in them. "They used long ago to be a great weight upon Susan's mind, when I was a little fellow, and was always trying to climb them, and running the daily risk of breaking my neck. I never did break my neck, or any other part of me, with them,—but Susan, you know, in those days watched over me like a hen over her one chicken."

This was Guy Dunstan, the master of the house, who was away on the other side of the world at present,—"the more's the

pity," as Aunt Susan often thought, "for there is too much upon my hands for any woman to see to properly. It is not the managing of the house I mind, for I am used to that, but it is the responsibility, and the charge of poor dear Helen, and the worry of Gabrielle's lovers: they are the worst of all! I daresay I am more anxious than I ought to be—but, oh, I shall be glad when Guy comes home!"

Miss Dunstan used to meditate in this manner some dozen times or more a day. She was probably meditating so at this very moment when Peggy Coulson came tripping across the grass, and dropped her curtsey, and gave her message.

"If you please, ma'am, mother says you'll be glad to hear we've got a lodger," said Peggy.

And then Miss Dunstan put aside her anxious thoughts, and stopped in her walk, and looked down kindly at the little maiden.

"And who *is* the lodger, my dear?" she said.

"She is Mrs. Hill, ma'am," answered Peggy.

"I don't think I know any Mrs. Hill," said Aunt Susan.

"No, ma'am," replied Peggy politely.

"No. I don't know any Mrs. Hill," repeated Aunt Susan thoughtfully: "but tell your mother I am very glad indeed to hear she has got her rooms let, and say I will look in to-morrow or next day to see about it. And you go round to the kitchen, Peggy, and get your supper, and then run away home as fast as you can, before it gets dark."

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that. I would learn how to buy them willingly, if you would teach me."

"Ah, but that wouldn't suit me at all!"

Gabrielle Lynn said this with an air of the sweetest innocence, and the next moment she put out her hand.

"What a nice walk you will have! Good-bye. I quite envy you," she said.

And then Mr. Walkington left the house, and chafed a little as he walked up the avenue to the gate.

Miss Lynn sat still when he was gone, in her luxurious low easy chair, close to the window, which was open, in the midst of the scent of flowers, with the light from the sunset on her summer dress and her idle hands. She was leaning back, doing nothing, thinking of not very much. Her day was done—her evening's entertainment end-

ed. She looked out of window with a little yawn, and then the clock struck nine. "Only nine! I can't go to bed yet: I wish I had something nice to do," thought foolish Gabrielle.

Miss Dunstan was moving up and down about the room,—putting the books straight that Gabrielle in the course of the day had been carelessly turning over, gathering together Gabrielle's scattered music, picking up her handkerchief and the knot of flowers she had dropped an hour ago upon the floor. Miss Lynn was in the habit when she occupied an apartment of sowing her property broadcast over it—a habit shocking in the highest degree to Aunt Susan's sense of orderliness; but she had tried to cure Gabrielle of it, and Gabrielle had proved incurable; so, instead of correct-

ing her any longer, she had fallen now into the new way of rectifying her faults with her own hands—a change in her system of education for which idle Gabrielle had been, and still was, infinitely grateful to her.

That young person (who was without a conscience) sat still, and indolently regarded the elder lady as she moved to and fro. Very likely—for so much does custom blunt keenness of perception—she was scarcely even aware of what Miss Dunstan was about; if she was thinking of anything at all she was probably thinking of Leigh Walkington, but she scarcely *was* thinking much of anything whatever. The day had been hot, and she had been feeling rather sleepy. To tell the truth, she often did feel sleepy—and not of nights only; for was it not a sleep-inspiring life that they led here at Wrexham,

where the bees buzzed in the garden, and the flowers bloomed in the sunshine, and they made flannel petticoats for old women, and saw the same people, and said the same things, and sang the same songs, from year's end to year's end?

"My dear—" said Miss Dunstan, breaking the silence at last suddenly.

Miss Dunstan, as I said, had been flitting about the room, doing this thing and that; but by this time her labours were completed, and she had come to the window where Gabrielle was sitting, and had taken a seat facing her niece.

"My dear," she said all at once, in an abrupt, perplexed way, "I don't know what to think about that young man."

"What young man?" asked Gabrielle blankly at this address (for she was a simple

creature, you understand), and she looked up into Miss Dunstan's face with a pair of inquiring, quite surprised blue eyes.

"I mean Mr. Walkington," explained Aunt Susan. (With so very innocent a person, you perceive, it was necessary to be explicit.) "Somehow I don't think, my dear —I am not easy about it—I don't think he ought to come so much here."

"Not to come here, when he is the clergyman!" said Gabrielle, in a tone of great amazement.

"Well, to be sure—yes, dear, I know that sounds very strange—of course, in as far as he is our clergyman he ought to come; but, Gabrielle, my dear child, clergymen are just the same, you know, as other men, and when they come about a house perpetually, their being clergymen has nothing to do

with it. No, indeed—nothing whatever," said Aunt Susan earnestly. "And as for Mr. Walkington, he is a very excellent young man, and I should be sorry with all my heart to be on any but the most kind and friendly terms with him; but yet for his own sake, and—and for your sake, my dear, I do think he begins to come here too often. Upon my word, I do, Gabrielle!" said Aunt Susan, with an anxious pucker in her brow.

"For *my* sake, Aunt Susan!" repeated Gabrielle slowly, in a tone of such proud and utter amazement that it quite made Miss Dunstan wince.

"My dear," she began again hurriedly and deprecatingly, "you know you are only a pair of young creatures: you can't persuade anybody that you are wiser than other

people,—and since the beginning of the world, I am sure, Gabrielle, you know what has been the result of two young people getting thrown together. Not that I mean there's any harm in it, in many a case,—not at all; but, dear, you ought to remember that I am here all by myself, and if anything of this sort should come about while your uncle is away, and if he didn't like it (and I know he wouldn't), it would be laid upon me, and I should never forgive myself. Indeed I shouldn't, Gabrielle!" said Aunt Susan, with almost tearful earnestness.

"Then what do you propose to do?" inquired Miss Lynn, with perfect composure.

"My dear?" exclaimed Aunt Susan, quite taken aback.

"Will *you* speak to Mr. Walkington, I

mean, or should you like me to do it? And what ought we to say to him? Are we simply to tell him not to come any more?—or are we to give him our reasons for it? I should like to do whatever you thought best," said wicked Gabrielle.

"Gabrielle, how can you laugh at me," exclaimed Aunt Susan reproachfully, "when you see how anxious I am?—when you see that that young man is quite a weight upon my mind?"

"He is not a weight upon *my* mind, Aunt Susan."

"Then, my dear, I can only say he ought to be, for you know—you know quite well—what he comes here for."

"He comes because he is idle, and because he likes play better than work. I have told him so many a time."

"I daresay you have; and you may go on telling him so many a time more, but that will make no difference in the end. You may tell him what you like, but as long as you give him the encouragement you do he will continue to come here just as often as he does now. And it is no use for you to try to deceive either yourself or me, Gabrielle, for you know what he comes for, and you know he comes because you encourage him. Oh, my dear, what would your uncle say if he were to come home, and find that I had been letting you drift into an attachment——"

"Drift into a *what*, did you say?" Gabrielle asked abruptly.

"Into an—attachment," said Miss Dunstan, rather hesitatingly.

"*I*, Aunt Susan?"

"My dear," in a tone of pathetic exhortation, "is not that what we have been talking of?"

"Of me drifting into an attachment!" Miss Lynn sat upright upon her chair, and looked into Aunt Susan's face with a look that almost took that lady's breath away.

"I was only supposing such a thing, you know," she began deprecatingly.

"But you had no right to suppose such a thing!"

"Well—but people can't help thinking of such possibilities, Gabrielle."

"You ought to know that it isn't a possibility at all, Aunt Susan."

"My dear,"—hesitatingly—"I should be very glad to believe that it was not."

"I would rather have my right hand cut off!"

"Well, dear—well,"—soothingly, and patting her niece's hand softly.

"Or go and sweep the crossings!"

"Oh, Gabrielle, that's foolish."

"Or be dead and buried!"

"My dear!—my dear!"

"How could you think such a thing of me, Aunt Susan?"

"My darling, how could I tell? I am sure if you don't care for him I am very thankful; but yet, you see, even then, that is only half the matter: there is still Mr. Walkington himself."

"Aunt Susan,"—pettishly—"I am tired of Mr. Walkington!"

"I am sure, my dear,"—fervently—"so am I! But still, if he *will* come here,

just like a moth flying round a candle——"

"You can't keep moths from flying round candles, Aunt Susan, when it is their nature to do it."

"Ah, Gabrielle, that is a hard thing to say! Real moths may fly round candles, and the candles not be to blame for it; but when the moth is a man, and the candle is a woman, then the case gets very different. And, Gabrielle, if you have any heart in you——"

"But I don't think I have, Aunt Susan."

"My dear?"—quite aghast.

"No, I don't think I have: I am almost sure I haven't—" and Miss Lynn shook her head with sweet composure. "And so, if that is the case, you know, it is no good for you to go on scolding me, is it?—because I can't understand you, or follow your argu-

ment. I am very sorry, Aunt Susan, but indeed I can't." And Gabrielle gave a sigh, and looked gently resigned.

Aunt Susan was so taken aback by this way of concluding the conversation, that for several seconds she sat without opening her lips,—and then all at once a bright little laugh rang through the room, and Gabrielle skipped to her feet, and clasped Miss Dunstan's neck round with her arm.

"Aunt Susan, I won't be lectured any more! I won't—I won't!" she cried. "I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself to fall upon me like this, when I have nobody to take my part. You may put Mr. Walkington under a bushel and extinguish him, —or lock him up for good in the vestry,—or talk to him all night yourself, if you like. There—is that enough to satisfy you? Yes,

the next time he comes you shall sit here and entertain him, and I'll go and water the flowers—and surely that will make it all right? Kiss me, and tell me that it will,—and say that you are sorry for having scolded me. You know, I don't like to be scolded," said the girl with a pretty pout. "Uncle Guy never scolds me when he is here."

"My dear, if your Uncle Guy were here," said Aunt Susan, "you wouldn't get leave to do many a thing that you do now."

But Miss Dunstan, though she shook her head, let her fingers stray fondly amidst the girl's bright hair, and stroked her cheek, and ended by kissing her with a kiss that was fervent enough to make the young beauty laugh. For did she care much for

being found fault with, or lectured, when people always ended by petting her? Let grave lips say what they liked, did she not always end by getting her own way, and winding all the household round her fingers? Life was a little dull sometimes at Wrexham, and who could blame Gabrielle very much if—now by queening it over Aunt Susan, now even by work a little more questionable than that—she tried at times to lighten its monotony?

CHAPTER II.

ESTHER HILL was sitting at one of the windows of her room, with her elbows on the sill of it, looking out. It was a pretty window, all grown round with creepers, with clematis and damask roses and white jessamine; but its beauty seemed to matter very little to Mrs. Hill, as she looked out straight before her, with a hard fixed look on her young face. It was not a look of anger, nor of defiance, nor of despair, nor even a mixture of all these; it was simply a rigid look, as if the world had done something to her that had almost

turned her into stone. And yet, as you examined the face, it seemed to have such power in it of being utterly the reverse of a rigid face, for naturally one could see that it had no element of tragedy in it: it must have been a face all bright with sunshine once; you could fancy the pale cheek with colour in it, and the eyes alight with happiness, and the golden hair loose that was swept severely back now behind her widow's cap. I think if she had been a dark woman, with large or handsome features, the strange fixity of the face would never have struck you in the strong and painful way that it did now. You felt as if, to become this, she must have suffered some singular calamity—endured some wrong or sorrow that set her apart from other women; you felt that no ordinary

grief could so have frozen and fixed her.

She was dressed with a curiously-determined absence of any even the feeblest pretence at ornament. Her dress was black, but it had not so much as a fold of crape upon it: her cap was a widow's cap, but it was as rigidly simple as a Quaker's. Two tiny bits of colour about her alone relieved the prevailing black and white—her marriage ring and her golden hair. The ring hung loosely on her finger, as if the hand had grown thin since it had been placed there: it seemed sometimes almost as if it would have fallen off, it was so loose.

She was sitting, as I said, looking out through her window, with a cold, expressionless, weary gaze. Full of a strange illegible history as the face was, she was still so young that the forehead had re-

mained almost wholly unmarked; the only lines that had come anywhere had come about the mouth. It was a delicate mouth, that one could imagine to have been very sensitive and mobile once, but the same sort of death that had got stamped upon everything else had got stamped upon it too, and the lines that had probably been tremulous and changeful long ago had become fixed and hardened now.

She was looking out on the cottage garden, but she was looking with eyes that took little note of what they saw there. It was evident enough that she was thinking of something far away,—thinking, not with any excitement, not perhaps any longer even with keen suffering, but with a dull persistency of thought,—looking her skeleton in the face with the hopeless

patience that comes from long companionship. She was thinking, not of anything that was to happen in the present, not of anything that was to be done or endured in the future, but only of the past, of the irrevocable thing that was done, and could never be undone.

"Is that your new lodger that I saw just now at the parlour window?" said Miss Dunstan to Mrs. Coulson. "Dear me, she quite gave me a turn! I think I never saw such an extraordinary face."

"Well, she's in trouble, poor dear," Mrs. Coulson said: and then the good woman began to talk about her. "She must have seen a deal of trouble. It goes to my heart to look at her, and she so young. She's not a day older than my Priscilla, I think,—and there's my Prissy with her husband

well-to-do, and two as fine boys as you'd wish to see,—and this poor thing without either husband or child. It's a bitter world to some people, Miss Dunstan, and it makes me sad, that it does, to see that poor soul."

"Poor thing!" said Aunt Susan compassionately. "Is it her husband's death, do you suppose, that makes her so unhappy?"

"Well, it's that, ma'am, and perhaps it's more than that: I wouldn't say,"—and Mrs. Coulson shook her head. "She's not one to talk, and she's not the kind of lady you'd like to ask questions of. 'I'm a widow,' was all she said to me the day she took the rooms. She said it just short like that—'I'm a widow, and there's none but myself,' says she, and then she said she knew nobody hereabouts, and she offered to pay me a

quarter's rent in advance,—but I didn't take it,—for, law, Miss Dunstan, I'm not afraid but what she'll pay. She's too full of trouble to be one of that sort,—that's what I think. Too full of trouble, poor soul!"

"And so," said Aunt Susan presently, as she sat by her niece Helen's side, amusing the invalid, as she was in the daily habit of doing, with a recital of all the odds and ends of news that she had picked up in her morning's trottings to and fro,—"and so, my dear, in this belief, like a kind-hearted woman as she is, she's racking her brains now to think what she can do for the poor thing, to cheer her up a little; and I am sure if I could help her I should be glad too, for I declare, Nelly, the thought of that face of hers haunts me. I can't tell you the sort of look it had."

"Perhaps she is ill," suggested Helen prosaically.

"I don't think merely being ill would make anybody look like that," said Aunt Susan, shaking her head, and decidedly rejecting this explanation. "No—what I think is that she has got something on her mind,—and if she has, poor soul, I can only say that it must be a dreary thing for her to sit there all day long without a soul to say a word to. And such a young creature too, dear! Not five and twenty, I'm sure."

"I should rather like to see her," said Helen.

It happened a few days after this that Helen did see her. Miss Lynn was being drawn in her invalid chair along the road that passed by Mrs. Coulson's cottage, with

Miss Dunstan walking by her side, when they met the widow suddenly face to face.

"That is Mrs. Hill," Aunt Susan had just time to whisper unheard.

She was coming towards them with her veil thrown back. Just as she was about to pass them, her eyes—large, grey, solemn eyes—looked up, and rested for a moment full on Helen. In another second she had passed. She was walking rapidly, but the exercise had brought no faintest flush of colour into her face.

"What a beautiful woman!" Helen exclaimed, with more warmth than she often showed.

"Yes, she must have been very pretty—must she not? But, oh, my dear, what a cheerless face it is! It is enough to take the sunshine out of the day to look at her.

And how thin she is!" said Aunt Susan with a shudder, for Miss Dunstan had a comfortable rotund little figure herself, and liked plumpness and rotundity in other people. "She's no better than a black thread paper."

"Here is Mr. Walkington," said Helen; "I wonder if he has seen her yet." And then, as the young man approached them, she held out her hand, and—"Mr. Walkington, I want to know something about Mrs. Coulson's new lodger," she said at once.

"Mrs. Coulson's new lodger? I didn't know that she had got one," Mr. Walkington answered.

"Then you haven't seen her? I wish you would go and see her, and tell me all about her."

"I should be very glad—only, is she a

Churchwoman?" asked Mr. Walkington.

"A Churchwoman? Oh, I don't know. I daresay she is," said Helen lightly.

"You see, I must find that out first."

"Why? Won't it do to know her unless she is a Churchwoman?"

"I must have some pretext for calling upon her, you know. If she should be a Dissenter—"

"Ah, then, it won't do to go near her, I suppose? Well, then, wait till after Sunday, and see if she comes to church—and then if she does, you will go and call, and come and tell me all about her—won't you?"

"I will certainly come and tell you any thing I can about her."

"Thank you; that is just what I want. And now, you are in a hurry, are you not? and we are only detaining you. Good-bye,"

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said Helen, and dismissed the young man with a gracious smile.

"Well—in my young days, my dear, I would no sooner have thought of asking the clergyman of the parish to run my messages than I would have asked the Prime Minister! But girls seem to do anything now a-days. I don't think there's any reverence left in the world," said Aunt Susan, shaking her head as they walked on again.

"How could anybody feel reverence for Mr. Walkington?" Helen answered with a laugh. (It was rather a contemptuous laugh, I am afraid.) "I don't see why he shouldn't run messages just as well as anybody else, if one happens to have any messages that he is capable of running. As for reverence—I can revere many things, but I can't revere Leigh Walkington."

"Well, well, my dear," answered Aunt Susan soothingly: and it was perfectly evident from the way in which Miss Dunstan evaded the subject by those two words, that, though she had chosen to moan over the spirit of the age, yet on this point at any rate she was in the bottom of her heart quite of one opinion with Helen.

Did anybody whatever, in fact, revere the young clergyman? These two did not, it is clear; and Helen's sister Gabrielle did not. What of Mrs. Hill, to whom in a few days he went to pay the pastoral visit that Helen had required?

That room of Esther Hill's was a pretty room, the best one of the cottage. He found her there, when Mrs. Coulson, preceding him with his card, ushered him into

it, sitting by one of the latticed windows, sewing. She had chosen that seat because her work was fine, and she needed light to do it by, not because she cared for the sight of the flowery garden round her room. Perhaps all day she had never so much as glanced once with any sense of pleasure up to the creeping rose that she could have touched by stretching out her hand, or the drooping tendrils of sweet jessamine.

She lifted up her eyes with a look of startled surprise when Mrs. Coulson came towards her, card in hand, and Mr. Walkington's gentlemanly boots creaked behind her on the carpet.

"It's Mr. Walkington, ma'am, the clergyman, you know," Mrs. Coulson explained, as she presented the card, in a rapid whisper.

Esther sat still for a moment; then, with her cold eyes regarding the intruder haughtily enough, she rose slowly up.

"Mrs. Hill, I think?" the young man said, and would have extended his hand; but her look and manner were so icy as she bowed to him that they instinctively repressed that friendly movement.

The bow was an assent to his question; perhaps also, in a slight degree, a greeting. After she had given it she stood still for a second or two; then, in answer to a very faint motion of invitation, he found himself a seat, and upon this she resumed her own. But she had not as yet opened her lips, and it was he who had to clear his throat, and begin to speak again.

"I heard of your arrival a few days ago from Miss Dunstan,—and I think I had the

pleasure of seeing you in church yesterday?" said Mr. Walkington.

"Yes, I was at church yesterday. But I do not know any Miss Dunstan," Mrs. Hill answered, in a cold, quiet, indifferent voice.

"Oh, I had understood—I beg your pardon—it is my mistake, I see. I thought you had met her?"

"I know no one here whatever."

"Indeed? But I hope you may soon become acquainted with Miss Dunstan. You will find her—ahem!—a most excellent person."

There was no answer to this, except a slight, almost imperceptible motion of the head.

"—Full of kindness and benevolence. Indeed the whole family,—Mr. Dunstan is

away at present,—but all the ladies of the family I am sure you will like exceedingly."

Still no reply. Then Mr. Walkington took up a fresh subject.

"You are—I think you said—a stranger here?"

"Yes—an entire stranger." This was said in the same tone of cold composure.

"A stranger to this part of the country altogether?"

"Yes."

"I hope that when you become better acquainted with the neighbourhood, you will find you like it. We have a good many objects of interest near us."

And then Mr. Walkington began to talk about these objects, and this occupied the time with tolerable success for some minutes.

At length, however, he came to a stop (his small archæological harangue had been almost exclusively a monologue), and there was a pause, and he cleared his throat afresh.

It had been rather uphill work, so far. Suppose he were to try and touch her feelings, he thought. Silent as she was upon ordinary subjects, she might like to talk about her troubles, perhaps. So Mr. Walkington allowed a few moments to pass in silence, and then, bending his head forward a little, and sinking his voice into a proper tone of gentle sympathy—

"You have had, I think, the misfortune lately to lose your husband?" he said.

There was to this for an instant no answer; then the reply came in the same unchanged cold tone.

"Yes—my husband is dead."

"You are very young to have been so—so heavily afflicted," said Mr. Walkington feelingly, but making this assertion very much in the dark,—nay, even in the act of making it, having an uneasy recollection that the loss of a husband is not necessarily to all women a heavy affliction, and perceiving that it was quite possible that to this one her loss might not have appeared in that light at all. However, the remark was made, and the assumption that her husband's death had afflicted her was at any rate a charitable one.

She was sitting with her thin hands folded over the work that lay upon her knees. As Mr. Walkington spoke, the first slight sign of feeling was betrayed by her in a faint, almost unnoticeable flush passing

across her face. She was silent too for a moment, as if she had to swallow down some emotion, or to steady her voice before she could reply to him. After that instant's silence she said slowly—

"Yes, I have been *bitterly* afflicted."

There was a distinct stress laid upon the word "bitterly," an accent of distinct though momentary passion.

"God's ways are often very mysterious to us. It is difficult for us—weak as we are—sometimes to recognize His hand,—" the young clergyman began.

"Yes; you do not know *how* difficult it is."

She said this with such a calm assumption of knowledge superior to that of the man before her,—as of one who had passed through a fire of which he could have no

conception—that his lips instinctively closed, and such other words of customary, well-meaning consolation as he had benevolently intended to deliver died away from them unspoken. He did not say so much to himself, but yet he somehow suddenly though vaguely felt that here was a woman whose sorrow—be it what it might—had lifted her into a state of being other than that in which he lived,—a state in which her ears were closed against the reception of common words, and her heart incapable of being stirred by the repetition of familiar shibboleths. Something like a momentary feeling of shame came to him,—yet mingled with other emotions less salutary than that,—shame that he was so powerless, yet along with this feeling of humiliation (which was wholesome) there came another feeling of

half vague resentment against the calm scorn that had humbled him.

He rose from his seat after some moments had passed in silence. The interview had been a short one, but he felt that he did not know how to continue it. After the rebuke of her last words he could not resume the tone towards her of a spiritual guide, nor could he without awkwardness return to the common-places of ordinary conversation. He felt that, unsatisfactory as any course that was open to him appeared to be, he had better at any rate select the most simple one, and take his leave. So he rose up gravely, after a minute of decent silence, and made a little—on the whole—not ungraceful parting speech.

"If it should be in my power at any time

during my stay here to be of any service to you, I hope you will make use of me,—either as a clergyman or otherwise," said the young man. "I have intruded on you so soon after your arrival, because sometimes, on other ocasions, I have found that, to a lady who happens to be a stranger, it is a convenience to be acquainted with the clergyman of the parish."

"Yes—you are very kind; I am obliged to you," she said, with something less of coldness than her manner had shown yet.

She had risen too. As Mr. Walkington put out his hand she also extended hers; but before their palms had met, as if some thought had suddenly struck her, she seemed to hesitate; then all at once she let her hand fall, and, raising her eyes to his face—

"Perhaps I had better speak to you," she said abruptly. (Mr. Walkington's face at once assumed a fresh expression of the gravest sympathy.) "I am very unwilling to trouble any stranger with what only concerns myself,—but perhaps as you say, you being a clergyman, and I knowing no one here, I may take the liberty of troubling you with one or two questions. I should be glad to know—you would oblige me," she said, half hesitating, "if you would tell me whether, from your knowledge of the neighbourhood, you think I should find it possible to obtain a few pupils here?"

"You want to establish a school?" Mr. Walkington inquired (he had relieved his face by this time from its sudden look of solemnity).

"I would try to get a school together, if that seemed to be advisable,—but I have hardly as yet thought of a school. I would rather, if I could, find an engagement as daily governess—to young children, or a situation as amanuensis, or as reader to some one. Do you think I have any chance of doing this? You understand that I am not asking you to recommend me anywhere," she said quickly with sudden haughtiness: "you could not possibly recommend a person who is an utter stranger to you. I merely want your opinion,—and so much kindness from you as to tell me if you know any one amongst your congregation to whom it might be worth my while to apply."

"Well, at this moment," said the young man doubtfully,—"let me see—I am afraid

I hardly know of any one at present. There are plenty of children everywhere, of course, but I suppose—as in other places—they are for the most part provided with teachers. However, if you will allow me to do what I can, I shall be most happy to keep the matter in mind, and I will mention your name wherever I think any good may come of it. I should hope that by waiting a little while——"

"Yes, I am prepared to wait," she answered quietly. "I shall have to wait, no doubt."

And then, with a certain grace and dignity, she put out her hand to him again. "You will believe that I am grateful to you," she said a little coldly, but with formal politeness.

"Pray do not think of such a thing. I

shall be only too happy if I can help you," he replied.

And then, not without a feeling that approached relief, he bowed himself to the door.

"And so, you see, I did not succeed in learning much about her," he said to Helen Lynn. (This was an hour later on the same day, for he was glad enough to make Helen's commission the excuse for paying an extra visit to Wrexham.) "She is not the sort of woman to let you ask questions of her. A curious, reserved, unattractive woman—quite extraordinarily unattractive, indeed, considering how very handsome she is."

"I am right about her being so handsome, then? Sometimes, you know, one makes mistakes at a first glance," Helen said;—

"but I hardly thought I had made a mistake here. And so she told you she was very unhappy about her husband?"

"She told me she was very unhappy. I suppose she meant me to assume," said Mr. Walkington, "that it was about her husband, —but she did not *say* so."

"And didn't you ask her?" said Helen.

"Well, no—I didn't exactly ask her," he replied.

"And she didn't tell you what made her come here? And you never asked her that either?"

"I am sorry to say I had no opportunity. She did not in the least encourage my inquiries."

"You ought to have asked without being encouraged."

"But she did more than not encourage

me; she discouraged me in every way in her power."

"I think she frightened you, Mr. Walkington." (There was a certain malice about Helen, and though she smiled, her eyes had mischief in them as she said this.)

"She didn't frighten me, but I can assure you she did very little to set me at my ease."

"Well, I can't understand much about her from your report. I'll make Aunt Susan go and see her."

"I think that would be a very kind thing to do."

"You might go and suggest it to her, then —will you? You will find her in the other drawing-room; or, if she is not there, Gabrielle is; or, if you can find neither of them there, then look for them in the garden. Thank you—don't trouble yourself about leaving

me; I have everything here that I want." And from her invalid chair Helen nodded an unceremonious adieu to the young man, and as he departed, took up the book again whose reading his entrance had interrupted.

She took it up as if she were eager to go on with it, but when he was gone she laid it down on her knees again rather wearily, and gave something like a sigh.

"How glad he is to go to Gabrielle! Everybody is glad to go to Gabrielle," she said, in a tone that was bitter enough; for she remembered a time when she had been what Gabrielle was now, and it is not easy at three and twenty to give up admiration —to feel that youth is gone. Helen Lynn had had a fall three years ago, and had hurt her back, and become a hopeless invalid. She had suffered a great deal since then,

and her face had grown pinched and thin, and her lips were drawn, and her colour had got sickly. She had lost her beauty, and she knew that she had lost it—and suffered for the loss when nobody knew that she was suffering. In general people used to think that she was very brave or indifferent, and would say to one another—"How cheerful she is in spite of it!" and then in the next breath would add—"But how altered she is! She was almost as pretty as Gabrielle once,"—never dreaming that, if Helen could have heard the last words, they would have hurt her like a sting, or, though she never really heard them, yet that she was always imagining that they were being said, and suffering from the imagination almost as sharply as she would have done from the reality.

"I can't think what has set you all talking so of this Mrs. Hill," Gabrielle was saying, sitting in one of her attitudes of graceful idleness (she was fond of picturesque attitudes) under an oak tree in the garden. "What is it that you suppose to be wonderful about her? She merely seems to be a pretty widow with rather an ugly and ungracious manner. It only proves how little we have all got to do or to think about! If we were half as busy as we ought to be," said the cool young beauty, "I don't think we would ever think twice of Mrs. Hill, or trouble ourselves with any speculations about her."

"You must remember that you have not seen her yet," Mr. Walkington replied.

"Well, I allow that I have not seen her—and I am not in the least curious to see her."

"Nevertheless you will be very much struck with her when you do."

"That is only an assertion,—and assertions made in that tone, you know, try one's temper. I wish you would talk about something else."

"I will talk about anything else you choose."

"Very well then—please begin."

"But begin what? You must tell me what you would like."

"How can I tell you what I should like?" —looking at him with innocent astonished eyes. "I don't know what I like until I try it."

"I am afraid you would be very slow to allow that you would like anything *I* could do."

This was said half in earnest,—and so

Gabrielle laughed at it. Miss Lynn was in the habit of taking to jesting whenever Mr. Walkington showed an inclination to become serious.

"You did something that I liked on Sunday," she said suddenly. "Shall I tell you what it was?"

"On Sunday?" he repeated. "I never saw you on Sunday except at church."

"No—but it was in church that you did it. It was your sermon on Sunday morning."

"Did you like that sermon?" The young man's face flushed up with a little foolish involuntary pleasure.

"Yes—I liked it; but I didn't so much mean that, as that it was so pleasant when it left off. The sun was in my eyes, you know, and I was so hot, and I was just

thinking that there was going to be ten minutes more of it, when all at once you came to a stop. Why had you made it so beautifully short, Mr. Walkington? Did you do it on purpose,—because of the warm weather, or had you come to the end of all you could find to say?"

"I don't think I very often give you cause to complain of the length of my sermons," the poor young clergyman said, with rather a forced smile.

"No, you don't—that is very true; but still last Sunday's was quite exceptionally short, you know. It was a delightful little sermon. I wish you would preach it again."

"I am afraid I couldn't do that,—even at your bidding," he said.

"I am sure it would do us quite as much good to hear it again as to have a new one."

"I don't doubt that. Or that it would do you equal good to have none at all," he said a little bitterly. "I don't suppose you ever attend to my sermons, do you? Do you ever remember one word of them?"

"Mr. Walkington, when you were little were you ever driven to despair by having to give an account of the sermons you heard? *I* used to be, when I was in short frocks, and I have had such a lively remembrance of it ever since."

"So lively, I suppose, that you think you are justified in paying no attention to sermons for the rest of your life? Well, looking at the matter from a clergyman's point of view, you can hardly expect me to think that you are right."

"Looking at it from a clergyman's point of view, I think that, if you did your duty,

you would read me a homily about it."

"Would any good come of that, do you think?"

"You ought to do what you feel to be your duty, whether good comes of it or not. But you don't care much about your duty. If I were a clergyman I should think a great deal more about my clergymanhood than you do. I wouldn't come here and talk and be idle in the sunshine,—at least not till working hours were over. I think," said Gabrielle, "if I were a man and had something to do I would do it with all my heart, and not only with a fragment of my heart. Women are obliged to be idle,—at least some women are; but I can't think how men can bear to be idle when all the world is open for them to find work in. There is a poor little old man who stands all day break-

ing stones in the road out there; have you noticed him? It must be a dreary thing to stand all day and break stones,—and yet that old man does it with such a will that I have stood still two or three times to look at him. I think it's a sight that would do you good, Mr. Walkington," said the girl, playing languidly as she spoke with the rings on her white hands.

"I know I am a fool to keep on going to that house," poor Leigh Walkington said to himself rather sadly, half an hour afterwards, as he went his way home. "Even if she would ever have me, how could I ask such a girl to be a clergyman's wife?"

But yet he would not give up going to the house.

CHAPTER III.

IN spite of her professed indifference, it was Gabrielle, and not Miss Dunstan, who was the first amongst the ladies at Wrexham to effect an introduction to Esther Hill. One showery day a tempest of rain came on as she happened to be almost passing Mrs. Coulson's, and she ran into the cottage for shelter.

"Will you take me in till the rain is over, Mrs. Coulson?" she said, putting her head in at the open door; and Mrs. Coulson upon this inquiry came from the kitchen with

her arms wet to the elbows with soapsuds.

"To be sure I will, Miss Gabrielle," she said; "but go into the parlour (Mrs. Hill's not in), for it's washing day, and we're having to dry indoors with this nasty weather, and the kitchen's full of things. Come this way;" and she was just about to usher Gabrielle into the best room, when, turning her head quickly to a sudden sound of steps on the wet gravel outside—"Oh! there *is* Mrs. Hill!" she exclaimed, in rather an altered tone, and stopped short, irresolute.

"Never mind; I will stand here. This will do perfectly well," Gabrielle said. "The rain will be over soon." And then she stood aside as Mrs. Hill came under the porch, with her dripping umbrella in her hand.

"You've been caught in the rain, ma'am," said Mrs. Coulson cheerfully. "Shall I stand the umbrella outside till the wet runs off it?"

Mrs. Hill resigned the umbrella with a quiet—"Thank you," gave one glance at Gabrielle, and passed in.

But when she had reached the parlour door she paused there, seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then turned her head.

"Mrs. Coulson!" she said; and when Mrs. Coulson had followed her into the room—"Is that young lady taking shelter from the rain? You had better ask her in here," she said coldly.

"Well, thank you, ma'am,—if you're so kind. It's Miss Lynn from Wrexham," said Mrs. Coulson.

"You had better ask her in," repeated Mrs. Hill.

Merely the same words, said again in the same utterly indifferent tone. You felt as though, if Mrs. Coulson had said, "It's the Queen, ma'am, from Buckingham Palace," it would have been all the same to Esther Hill.

Without speaking again she passed on into her bedroom, which adjoined the parlour; and Mrs. Coulson returned to Gabrielle, and with a little improvised embellishment delivered her message.

"Mrs. Hill says she hopes, Miss Gabrielle, you'll step in, and sit down and rest while the rain lasts," said Mrs. Coulson in her pleasant cordial voice. "Do come in, for it's heavier on than ever."

And then Gabrielle went in. Perhaps,

in spite of her denial, even she too was a little curious about the handsome widow, and was not sorry to have this chance of gratifying her curiosity.

The parlour, when she entered it, however, was empty, and for ten minutes no one interrupted her solitude, as she sat by one of the open windows, now watching the heavily-falling rain outside, now beguiling the time by taking note of such changes in the room as its new owner had effected. Those changes on the whole were few,—fewer by a good deal, Gabrielle thought, than most women would have made in it. The formal arrangement of the old-fashioned furniture was unaltered; the six annuals and books of beauty that for years had stood ranged with mathematical precision upon the principal table in the middle of the

room retained their accustomed place of honour; a little disarrangement of the chairs, an open work-box on a side table, and—thrown down with apparent carelessness on one of the window seats—a large elaborate piece of fine embroidery, were about the only signs that the room showed of feminine occupation. Gabrielle looked at the embroidery from the distance of a couple of yards or so, and shrugged her shoulders at it. "Poor soul, no wonder she is in low spirits," she thought to herself, "if she spends her time sitting alone here sewing at that weary thing! There seems work enough in it to last a life-time,—and what will be the use of it to her, I wonder, when it is done!"

And then she yawned. The rain was raining as fast as ever, and, since she *was*

here, she wished the widow would come.

But the widow had gone into the adjoining room, with no intention of emerging from it till the shower should be over, and her visitor departed; and Gabrielle waited and waited for a long time in vain for either entertainment or deliverance. It was one of those determined showers that sometimes last an hour or more, descending all the time with as much passion and eagerness as if the issue was meant to be exhaustion in ten minutes. "Surely it is going to clear soon!" Gabrielle thought again and again; but yet it did not clear, and at last Esther Hill's patience wore out as well as hers. She was yawning for about the twentieth time, when suddenly the door of communication between the two rooms opened, and, acknowledging Gabrielle's presence

merely by a silent inclination of the head, Mrs. Hill quietly came into the room.

Gabrielle had risen as the door opened, intending to come forward and make some courteous little speech; but somehow as she caught sight of the widow the words for a moment hung upon her lips unspoken, and it needed an effort after that involuntary pause to say them. She hesitated a little as she began.

"I am staying here such a long time. I hope—I hope I am not in your way? This shower is lasting so very much longer than I had thought it would," she said.

"It is a very heavy shower. You cannot go till it is over," Mrs. Hill replied.

"You are very good."

And then, a little uneasily, Gabrielle sat

down again; and Mrs. Hill sat down too, and began to work.

For a few minutes Gabrielle held her peace, and did not say another word. She sat looking at the fair, pale, immovable face as it bent over its sewing, till, in spite of her former ridicule of Mr. Walkington and the others for their desire, as she expressed it, to get up a story and make a mystery out of nothing, an eerie sort of feeling began to creep over her. For the woman was so cold and self-possessed and passionless,—so beautiful, and yet with that strange look of utter indifference about her, as if she felt that her very beauty was a mockery, and scorned it too, and put it, as far as she could put it, away from her.

"How in the world can a woman be as lovely as that, and yet look as if she cared

nothing about it?" thought Gabrielle to herself in blank amazement. And the thing seemed so unnatural to her, and so astonishing, that after she had sat for three or four minutes in silence she began to feel—as she herself described it afterwards—as if she was sitting with some one who was fascinating her with some uncanny spell which nothing but speech could break. So, having come, with considerable rapidity, to this conclusion, Gabrielle (who, to tell the truth, loved silence very little) proceeded to open her lips.

"I wonder if you will let me introduce myself to you?" she said abruptly, rising as she spoke, and coming to a seat nearer the other window.

Mrs. Hill at this exordium laid down her work, and lifted up her eyes to the girl's

face; but she made no answer, and so Gabrielle went on.

"I have not a card with me,—but I am Gabrielle Lynn, and we are friends of Mr. Walkington's, and we have heard about you from him.

"Mr. Walkington was so good as to call upon me," Mrs. Hill said composedly.

"Yes—he told us so. And—and he interested us about you. You are quite a stranger here, are you not?" said Gabrielle, trying to feel at ease, and to enter upon ordinary topics of conversation.

"Yes; I have never before been in any part of the west of England."

"Then what can have made you come here now?" Gabrielle was sorely tempted to inquire; but of course so frank a question

was impossible, so instead of asking it she merely said—"Indeed?" And then she had to cough a little cough to fill up the silence that succeeded; for Mrs. Hill, having made her single statement quite concisely and distinctly, seemed to consider that it was neither necessary for her to repeat it, nor to add anything further to it. So a pause followed Gabrielle's polite "Indeed?" until,—still bent on following any course in preference to the course of holding her tongue,—Miss Lynn after a minute began afresh.

"May I speak to you of what you were saying to Mr. Walkington about taking pupils? He told me that you wanted to get some,—but perhaps you would not mind telling me something more? I don't think he seemed to know whether you

wanted young children or elder ones," said Gabrielle.

"I could only teach young children," Mrs. Hill answered. Her face had shown an evidence of something resembling interest in this last speech of Gabrielle's: she had looked at least as if she was listening to her, which she had hardly done before. "I could only teach young children," she said. "I should not care whether they were boys or girls; but they must be children, for I can only teach English and French, and a little German—and music, if they should want music," she said, adding the last words with an appearance of unwillingness.

"We may hear of some one who is in need of a governess. If we should, we will be sure to speak of you," Gabrielle said. And then

after a moment she added in a quick impulsive kindly way—"I should be so glad if we could help you at all in getting what you want."

"Thank you—you are very kind."

Mrs. Hill said these matter of course words as if at first she meant to add no more to them; yet perhaps the girl's cordial tone did really arouse some momentary feeling resembling gratitude in her, for after an instant or two's silence—"I have no right to expect so much interest from a complete stranger," she said.

"Oh, but we have all been interested in you."

Gabrielle said this again in her quick way, and then paused and hesitated, and thought she would say no more; but, with all her faults, the girl was warm-hearted, and this

woman's loneliness and desolation had touched her, and so, after she had hesitated for a moment or two, she added suddenly—"We have been so much interested that, if we had not been afraid of intruding upon you, some of us would have called—my Aunt would have called before this to see if she could be of any use to you. But I hope you will let her come now: will you?" she said.

She had risen up: a faint gleam of sunshine had come into the room, and she knew that at last the rain must be ended or ending. She stood with her bright kind young eyes looking frankly into Esther's face—eyes that in spite of all her vanity and folly were so winning in their honest sweetness. The elder woman lifted up her head, and gazed into them for a moment or two;

then she also rose, and in the calm self-possessed voice that so rarely showed the slightest touch of feeling—

"It can hardly be a pleasure to any one to come and see me," she said. "I do not mean that I want to shut myself out from kindness, where kindness is voluntarily offered me" (she said this slowly), "but—" and here she was silent for a moment, and then went on rapidly, and almost as with a kind of impatience and resentment at having been as it were forced into saying something about herself that she had not meant to say—"but you see for yourself that I am a woman oppressed and almost overwhelmed by trouble. You see how little fit I am for taking any part in common society. If you ever care—you, or the other lady that you speak of—

to come again and visit me, I will make you welcome; but this is all I can say—I cannot with truth say more than this."

"Indeed, we know—we all know that you have suffered a great deal," Gabrielle said quickly, half below her breath, with an almost shy glance at the black dress; for to Gabrielle, as to many another young happy creature, a great sorrow was a great mystery, one of the few things that her irreverent fingers shrank from meddling with, and at nearness to which her lips became awe-struck and mute. She glanced at the black dress, feeling powerless to do anything more than that,—taking for granted (as most people would have done) that the sable garb was the outward sign of the inward trouble—the natural consequence and outcome of that. "I suppose her husband

has only been dead a very little while," she thought to herself; and as she stood there, in her bright fresh happy youth, the girl felt a pang of kindly pain and pity for this other woman, so little older than herself, to whom life had given so different a lot.

She put out her hand in the silence that followed her last words, for Mrs. Hill made no answer to them, and in a few moments more they had wished each other good-bye and parted.

"She is the strangest woman I ever saw," said Gabrielle inwardly, breathing the fresh air with a feeling of relief as she stepped out once more into the sunshine, and prepared to tread her way daintily homewards over the flooded road. "I never in my life saw any woman with such a look in her face. What a terrible thing it would be to

with her! I think in a month's time she would turn me into a stone." And Gabrielle shuddered at the very thought of such an existence as she tripped lightly on her way; and yet, though she shuddered, and though she felt much as some one might feel who, after a little confinement in a dark place, had come back to upper air, and the natural light of God's sunshine,—still it was with something else than a mere feeling of shrinking that she went home, musing and meditating upon Esther Hill. There was something in the interview they had had, cold as it had been, that she could not forget,—something in the woman's clouded beauty that haunted her like a dream.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. DUNSTAN was at the Australian gold-diggings,—not digging for gold himself, but watching those who were. He was a man who had a passion for travelling, —a robust, healthy, active man, with too much energy in him to find the placid life at Wrexham quite satisfying to either his mental or material nature. "I do wish that Guy would marry and settle down," his sister had been saying for many a past year. But Mr. Dunstan was forty years old now, and had never yet shown any intention of doing either the one thing or the other. He

was not fond of settling down; he was not inclined to wife taking. He seemed to be contented with the womenkind he always had at home: his sister to take care of him, his nieces to pet or tease him,—what more than that should a man want? "My dear, you would be so much happier if you were to marry," Miss Dunstan would often say to him with tender solicitude; but her brother never appeared able to see the matter in this light. "I should get a good many burdens upon my shoulders that I haven't got now," he would coolly answer,—"and gain no particular advantages that I can conceive. I might marry as a penance, because my life without a wife is too easy a one; but the longer I live the less do I think I am likely to do it as a pleasure." And then, after some such speech as this, Mr. Dunstan would chuckle

to himself in a way that denoted supreme satisfaction with his own way of life, and Aunt Susan would sigh and shake her gentle head. "I don't know where you learnt this sort of talk, Guy," she would sometimes say, "you never learnt any of it, I am sure, from me." Which was an assertion that her brother certainly never attempted to dispute.

As for the two girls—Mr. Dunstan's being at home was always a pleasant thing to them. Unwilling to take a wife though he was, he was a man who liked to have women round him,—who indeed would hardly have endured a house without a woman in it. He was fond of his nieces, (whose home had been at Wrexham now for the last half dozen years), much in the same sort of way that he might have been

fond of a pair of spoilt pet kittens whom he passively permitted to plague him and impose upon him almost without limit for nine-tenths of the time they spent together; but over whom, on the rare occasions when he chose to exert it, he exercised an authority that Gabrielle herself never disputed. Nor even resented,—which was perhaps saying something both for Gabrielle and for Mr. Dunstan. But, in truth, Gabrielle (happily for herself), in spite of her wilfulness, liked a man who would not bear everything from her. After the fashion of other silly young creatures, she loved what she called her liberty, and, simply on the ground of her womanhood, would think herself justified in teasing and worrying a man unlimitedly,—unless he stopped her; but if he stopped her when she knew she

ought to be stopped she respected him for it; and if he did not stop her, in her heart she despised him,—as at present, though she only half knew it, she despised poor Leigh Walkington.

But she did not despise her Uncle Guy; on the contrary, she liked him better than she liked most people; better, perhaps,—that is to say, more seriously—than he liked her. For, indeed, he hardly liked her seriously at all. His regard for her was made up of kindness and indulgence rather than love: she was something to play with, to pet, to submit to,—and then occasionally, with a strong hand, to rule; but this was all,—while he was to her one of the few people who really influenced her, and to whom she looked up. She cared for him enough to be jealous because

he was more tender to Helen than he was to her. He had liked her best once perhaps, but now that Helen was ill it was she who had become his favourite (or Gabrielle at least thought that she had), and she resented this a little. She was inwardly a little sore over it; she knew it was natural that he should pet Helen most, and yet she did not like it.

"You would do it if Nelly asked you," she would say to him sometimes in moments of stubbornness on his part; and when he would answer, as perhaps he might, in jest —"I always do what Nelly asks me,"—the answer would be rather bitter to Gabrielle, and not a mere careless joke, as it was with him. For Gabrielle liked to be first with every one,—as indeed a good many women do.

Mr. Dunstan at this time had been away for nine months, and they were all wishing heartily that he would come back again. He rarely left them entirely for so long as this: he had never before, since the girls had come to Wrexham, gone away either for so long or to so great a distance.

"And I am sure I hope he never will again," Aunt Susan would often say fervently, "for the worries of one kind or another that I have when I am here all alone fairly wear me out. I am not a good sort of person to stand worries, I daresay, but I do think it needs a man to keep things straight in a big place like this—and I am sure it needs a man to look after Gabrielle. I can manage Nelly now (poor dear, I wouldn't say it to any one, but it's an ill

wind that blows nobody any good, and her illness has been a real blessing to *me*), but Gabrielle gets the upper hand of me. It's no use to deny it—I know she does, and she shouldn't—such a mere slip of a girl as she is; and Guy should be here to prevent it. But, dear me, Guy doesn't think of that!" So, in her brother's absence, Aunt Susan, for one, had her troubles.

Nor were Helen and Gabrielle either without their own special regrets.

"I think there is nothing in the world so stupid as a household of women," Gabrielle would say with most devout sincerity. "Why are there so many women in the world? Why don't we smother half of them when they are babies, Aunt Susan? People would think something of us if we did that; they wouldn't shut us up in

little boxes by ourselves, then, and just come carelessly and take a look at us once in a way for a week or two, as Uncle Guy does. Uncle Guy would turn over a new leaf if he were to be made to feel that he might come home some day and find none of us left,—not a woman left to pour him out a cup of tea, or sew on a shirt button for him! I wish I could manage that he should. I would take flight, if I had it in my power, to-morrow,—and then I think, Aunt Susan, if he ever caught us again he would take a little more trouble than he does now to keep us."

"My dear, you shouldn't talk so; it isn't nice," Aunt Susan would say, rather scandalized, in reply to some such speech as this; and of course the notion of anything so shocking as the smothering of female

babies, or so revolutionary as Gabrielle's scheme for asserting her equality to man by taking wing from the spot in which he had placed her, and leaving him to sew on his own shirt buttons, had never entered Miss Dunstan's gentle and decorous mind; but still, in the main point—the desire that Mr. Dunstan should come home—both she and Gabrielle, and indeed Helen too, agreed. In fact, the house *wanted* a man to be at the head of it. It was to a certain extent in a ruinous state for want of that natural masculine government; it was in a state of partial disorganization—delivered up to feminine rule, and, worse than that, to disjointed and separate feminine rule. Nominally in its highest place sat Aunt Susan, with her sceptre at her feet instead of in her hands; with her heart full of all goodness and lov-

ing kindness, and her head full of all feebleness and perplexity: and on either hand of her sat Gabrielle and Helen,—the one ruling herself, and whosoever else would submit to her, by the irregular fantastic sway of her own wayward will; the other establishing her dominion by the power of the petty tyranny of idleness. Neither of them meaning any harm; both of them even meaning well, and loving one another, and having kind womanly hearts within them, but yet, in a sense, running to seed; claiming and obtaining a liberty that, having got, they did not know what to do with; using it to the utmost, and yet growing weary of it, and finding their deepest desire to be that the hand that had left them free should come back again to put the bit once more into their mouths, and the bridle upon

their necks, and give them the happy feeling that they had a voice to follow, and a will beyond their own will to obey, and a better object with which to fill their days than the monotonous object of ministering her to their own delights.

"I will do—this, or this," Gabrielle was continually thinking, "when Uncle Guy comes back."

Not now, but in that pleasant time to come when the wheels of the household machinery should have got oiled for the master's coming, and all things should be brightened and quickened, and there should be a general stirring and awakening, and this dreary, indolent, present life should cease,—this life that Gabrielle, after a fashion, fell into an idle way of liking too, just from the very ease of it, but yet that in

her heart she was weary of and dissatisfied with.

If she had had more occupations to fill her life the interest which had been aroused in her by the sight of Esther Hill would in all likelihood have remained a mild interest, or would perhaps have died quickly away, and the whole course of Esther's future life in consequence would have been different. But she was idle, she wanted occupation, she was weary of monotony; and so it happened that she began to let the thought of this woman fill her imagination. She went again to see her presently, and came away more than ever charmed with her beauty. After that second interview she was to a large extent fascinated by her. Impressionable, if she was light and flighty too, she fell after this to musing about her, speculat-

ing over her possible history, trying to devise schemes for helping her. She rather wearied the others with her perpetual talk about her. She persuaded Aunt Susan to go and call upon her, and was considerably disappointed when Miss Dunstan after that visit gave it as her opinion that the widow was not a very agreeable woman. "If she is not agreeable, she is something else that is far more uncommon," Gabrielle said a little hotly; and to this Aunt Susan did not make the least demur. "I think she is something very uncommon indeed, my dear," she rather dryly replied.

A sudden happy idea struck Gabrielle at last after two or three weeks had passed, during which the few and casual glimpses which she had obtained of Mrs. Hill had just sufficed to keep her interest in her on the increase.

"I wish we could do something for her," she was saying to Miss Dunstan one day. "I can't help thinking that she is very poor. Aunt Susan, can we really think of nobody who wants a governess?"

"My dear," replied Aunt Susan, a little irritably, for this question had been put to her many times already, "you are quite aware that we do not know any body at present."

"Is there anything that she could teach *me* then, I wonder! I know so few things: I daresay, if I were to talk to her I should find that she could teach me something," Gabrielle said.

"Gabrielle, you are talking foolishly," replied Aunt Susan.

"Because I say that I might learn something?"—and Miss Lynn looked up with

those innocently astonished eyes of hers.

"No—but because you know you don't *want* to learn. You wouldn't learn anything from Mrs. Hill. You know that quite well."

"But if I could engage her to teach me, and pay her for it, it would not matter whether I learnt or not. I want her to be paid—that is the only thing I care about, and I can't go and offer her money for nothing."

"My dear, you have such childish schemes,"—and Aunt Susan shook her kind old head.

"Childish schemes are not bad schemes always. I think my plan might do till something better were to turn up. Or—wait!" cried Gabrielle all at once, with a look of sudden inspiration in her face.

"Wait a moment: I have thought of something." And then there was a few moments' pause. "Why should not she come and read to Nelly?"

"Why *should* she?" asked Aunt Susan composedly.

"Because Nelly would like it—I am sure she would. She might have Mrs. Hill instead of me; and she could have her at a regular time, instead of only having me when she can get me; and it would save her from tiring her own eyes, and it would be something settled and pleasant and orderly. If only Mrs. Hill should read fairly well! But I think she must—she speaks as if she would. I don't think she would ever gabble over a thing, as Nelly always says I do—and as I daresay is quite true," said Gabrielle with unwonted humility.

"Now, Aunt Susan, is there no wisdom in such a plan as this?"

"Well, my dear, I don't see the use of it," said Aunt Susan doubtfully.

"Not see the use of reading to Nelly!"

"Not of bringing some one whom we know nothing about into the house to do it. Why should it be *our* business to find employment for Mrs. Hill? If she is poor, I am very sorry—but really, Gabrielle, I think it is putting ourselves out of our place for *us* to try and provide for her. Of course I don't mean to say but what she might read to Nelly—but I would rather not have such a thing started; I would rather not indeed," said Aunt Susan uneasily.

For it was one thing, Aunt Susan thought, to relieve the hungry and comfort the distressed, unquestioned, but another thing

altogether to open your gates to a stranger and take her—ignorant of her antecedent life or future prospects—into your bosom. Society demanded some credentials from its stranger before doing this, and society was perfectly right, Miss Dunstan reasonably thought. So—"I don't see the use of thinking of such a thing; I really should strongly object to it, Gabrielle," Aunt Susan said with quite a tone of decision in her voice.

To say No to a plan of Gabrielle's, however, was not often found to be an easy way of disposing of it; for Gabrielle had a trick of getting her own way whether you said No or Yes to her. From the hour that this scheme entered her mind she set herself to the task of carrying it out, and she gave little peace either to Aunt Susan

or to Helen till they ceased to oppose it. "I think she will put us into low spirits if she comes here; but of course you know I like to be read to, and she can hardly read worse than Gabrielle does—and so, if she really wants something to do, and would like to come and be tried, I have no particular objection to it," Helen was the first to say. Miss Dunstan hesitated a little longer, but Miss Dunstan too at last gave in —and Gabrielle's point was won. The offer after this was made quickly (Aunt Susan called upon the widow, and with due formality, and some inward reluctance, made it in person), and quietly and not without some appearance of gratitude accepted; and on a June day, near to Midsummer, Esther Hill's engagement began, and she took her first walk to Wrexham,

and for the first time crossed that threshold which was destined to become so familiar to her in after-days.

CHAPTER V.

THE hours that they had fixed on for her coming were in the morning from twelve till two. "Our readings will be rather severe and solemn things, I am afraid," Helen said with a laugh, before they began; but when they really began she was to a large extent pleasantly disappointed, for the grave sad woman discovered a certain power, when her mind was occupied and interested by the book she read, of to some extent throwing aside her sadness. She struck a sort of chill on Helen on the first morning when she came into her room,

and took the chair that had been placed for her, and, after a very few formal words, asked and obtained the book she was to read from; but ten minutes afterwards Miss Lynn was lying back in her invalid chair, with her knitting laid upon her knees, listening with a sense of conscious pleasure to the sound of Esther's voice. Not that Mrs. Hill read in any remarkable or exceptional way. She simply read well, as any intelligent sweet-voiced woman might who had had some practice in the art of reading aloud, and was fond of it. She read no better than Helen had hoped that she might do, except in one particular (though that an important one)—that her mind seemed to be with her book, not with herself or her own troubles. Helen had expected that it would be otherwise, but

it was not,—though whether the book involuntarily expelled the thought of her troubles, or whether, by a strong exercise of will, she forced her mind to withdraw itself from them while she read,—this Helen could not tell. All that she could perceive was the result, and the result was unexpected by her. The voice lost its coldness as she read, the face lost its rigid look, the woman thawed beneath the human and wholesome influence of thoughts that were not her own thoughts, and that had no bearing on her own life. Perhaps she began by saying to herself—"I am hired to do this thing: I must force myself to forget myself, that I may do it well;" but if she did this she seemed to come presently to forget herself unconsciously.

"I daresay you know this book already,

—but do you mind reading what you have read before?" Helen had said to her as she handed her the volume she had chosen.

"I am afraid I care for what I have read before more than for most new things," Mrs. Hill had answered; and then she took the book, and read it as if she loved it.

"Yes, I know it; I knew it long ago, when I was young," she said in reply to a question from Helen when the two hours had ended.

And then, when she said this—

"When you were young? Are you not young now?" Helen ventured to ask her with a little laugh; but the face had got back its mask then that had been half lifted from it for a little while, and there

came no answer for a moment, and then only the cold reply—

"I mean that I knew it five or six years ago."

"And how old were you then?" Helen asked.

Helen was still lying in her reclining chair, with her head thrown back upon the pillows. During these last two hours she had not taken her eyes very often from Esther Hill's face, and now she put this sudden question to her with that half insolence in questioning that some invalids seem to consider a pleasant privilege of invalidism.

Mrs. Hill turned round as it was asked her, and looked for a moment in Helen's face: then something that was like a half smile came for an instant across her lips,—

the partially amused, partially scornful smile that you might give to some foolish question from a child, and—

"I am five-and-twenty now. Why do you want to know?" she said.

"Because I had been wondering. Only five-and-twenty!—and I am twenty-three!" said Helen, with a curious intonation in her voice.

Day after day, punctual to a minute, Esther Hill came to her engagement. It was sunny summer weather, the walk from her lodgings about half a mile, the way for the most part a pleasant way by a road shaded with elm trees and limes. "How peaceful this is!" she used to say to herself. She would throw back her veil sometimes when the road was free from passers-by, and linger a little in the sunshine,—as if she had

loved it once, in the days before her life had died out of her.

Regularly every day she read to Helen for her appointed two hours. Helen would sometimes rather have talked than read,—would dearly have liked, if she could have had her way, rather to lie in that invalid chair of hers, and put questions to the woman at her side; but that woman had her own will too, which proved stronger than Helen's, and Miss Lynn very soon discovered that the plan of extorting anything from Mrs. Hill's lips that those lips did not choose to utter, by questioning however dexterous, was a plan that did not answer. A few trifling facts concerning her former life she succeeded in extracting from her; then one day, quietly and resolutely, Mrs. Hill made further questioning cease.

Helen on that day, with more boldness than usual, had been putting one inquiry after another to her.

"It must be so dreary for you to live alone! Have you no near relations alive?" —"Had your husband no near relations?" —"Would it not be pleasanter for you to go and live near them?" she had been asking, and Mrs. Hill had replied to each inquiry until the last one came; then at that one she suddenly turned her illegible face round, and—

"Miss Lynn," she said, looking full at Helen, "will you forgive me if I say to you once for all that I do not want to speak about myself? I have suffered so much that I cannot do it. I know that I have come here in a suspicious way, for I am without friends, and I have no story to tell

anyone, except that I am alone in the world; and if you were to resent my secrecy, and to withdraw your kindness from me in consequence of it, I understand fully that I should have no right to complain; but yet, even if you were to do this, I cannot help it,—for, I repeat it again,—let my reserve cost me what it may,—I *cannot* speak about myself!"

She said these last words, not in her ordinary voice, but with a sudden tone of anguish and passion that thrilled through Helen, and brought an almost impetuous reply from her; for the girl was inquisitive and sometimes impertinent, but at the bottom of her heart there was some generosity too.

"Oh, pray forgive me! I did not mean to hurt you. Of course you have every

right to be silent if you please," she said, with her hand held eagerly out; and she took Esther's hand, and drew her towards her with a little gentle force, and kissed her. And then she put no more direct questions to her after this, whatever further grains of information concerning her she might try to extract by more artful means.

It had scarcely been with Aunt Susan's cordial concurrence that Mrs. Hill had first begun to come to Wrexham; but, cold and reserved as Esther Hill was, there was something about the sad and silent woman that soon appealed irresistibly to the kindness of a nature like Miss Dunstan's. "Poor young thing," she had begun to say of her before her engagement had lasted for a week,—"she is not a cheerful object in the house certainly, but as for

not being interested in her, that is impossible. I am sure I think I am an old fool for the way I sit and look at her, and wonder about her. I think she has got the most beautiful forehead and eyes, Nelly, that I ever saw in any mortal face."

This heart of Aunt Susan's was a heart that was touched easily, and that, when once reached, had bottomless depths of tenderness and kindness in it. No creature came near her needing help whom she could keep from helping long. Before Mrs. Hill had been to Wrexham half a dozen times Miss Dunstan had begun to pet her.

"My dear, you are looking so tired," she would say to her; and then she would fall to prescribing wine and rest, and whatever

other good things it was in her power to help her to, preaching kind little sermons over her as she administered her prescriptions. She would hover about her on damp mornings, with an eye to the state of her boots and the warmth of her shawl; she would take possession of her at luncheon-time (for they always made her stay to luncheon), and press her to eat with an earnestness that the two girls used to laugh at. She broke one day when it was wet into an eager protest against her going back to her lodgings through the rain; and that day, for the first time, Mrs. Hill stayed during the afternoon, as well as the morning, at Wrexham.

"Why should you go, when you have nobody at home to want you?" Aunt Susan said to her. "Here is a big house, and

not very many of us in it. Just make yourself comfortable where you like, and stay as long as you like."

"For we can't let her go running about in the rain, you know," Miss Dunstan half deprecatingly explained to Gabrielle. "It wouldn't be right,—and, poor thing, I am sure she is welcome to be here as long as she pleases. I shall only be glad if it *does* please her to stay, for it goes to my heart to think of such a sorrowful creature sitting hour after hour by herself."

Upon which Gabrielle chose to make a wicked answer.

"Do you think it is quite right to let her stay, when we know so little about her,—and there are so many silver spoons in the house?" said the girl, with a gleam of laughter in her eyes,—choosing in her

insolent way to turn the tables, and make use of something like Miss Dunstan's own previous arguments to bring her to confusion,—until, as Aunt Susan fell to blushing,—"My dear old Aunty, who is the prudent one amongst us!" cried Gabrielle, and laughed outright as she kissed the conscious cheek.

"And yet, though we are all falling in love with her, Mrs. Hill is still a mystery," Gabrielle said one morning to Leigh Walkington. "Can you not find out something about her? You find out nothing! *Is* she breaking her heart for her husband or not?"

"Is it reasonable to ask *me* such a question?" he answered with a laugh. "If you see her every day and cannot answer it, how can you expect me to answer it when

I have never seen her at all except twice?"

"But you are a clergyman; you ought to be able to find out. Something must be wrong with a clergyman if he can't make his flock tell their troubles to him."

"I have no doubt many things are wrong with me. In your sight I believe all things are wrong," the young man said in the tone of mingled reproach and vexation to which she often drove him.

"You might go and see her again, and say something to her."

"Say what sort of thing to her?"

"How can I tell you what sort of thing? You ought to know that. Don't you ever go to see people who are in trouble?"

"You know I do."

"Then don't you know what you say to them?"

"I know very well what I say in an ordinary case; but Mrs. Hill's is not an ordinary case. She is not the sort of woman to whom one could easily offer consolation."

"Ah—you feel that, do you?"

"Of course I feel it. How could I help feeling it?"

"I thought that perhaps, being a clergyman, you would not. I, who am only a woman, feel it very strongly."

"I, being a man, am likely to feel it quite as strongly. Mrs. Hill, I imagine, would resent any attempt to force oneself upon her confidence."

"I am afraid she would, but yet I should so like to know her story. Should not you?"

"I am scarcely so much interested in her as you are."

"I can't think how you can help being interested in her. Don't you admire her?"

"She is handsome certainly; but I don't think the face is an attractive one."

"It is a face to haunt you. A face to make endless stories out of."

"Possibly; but not pleasant stories."

"Mr. Walkington, you don't appreciate her: I won't talk to you any more about her!—Which way are you going?" said the girl, for they had met upon the road one day as Gabrielle was walking home, and they had come to a place now where two roads parted.

"I am going presently to the Gilberts'; but let me come with you first as far as the gate. They are expecting young Gilbert home next week, it seems," he said,

as they continued to walk on side by side.

"Yes, I know,—and his mother is very happy. But somehow it is an uncomfortable sort of thing. I don't quite see how it is to be managed. Don't you think it will be very awkward?" said Gabrielle.

"Well—a good deal will depend upon the young man himself. It *will* be a little awkward, I suppose,—but of course there have been many other instances of the same sort of thing."

"Yes—only we never had an instance of it before here. If Uncle Guy were at home I know he would treat him just as he would anybody else,—but you see, we couldn't possibly ask the blacksmith and his wife to dinner," said Gabrielle.

"Of course not. It would be quite out of the question."

"And yet to think of inviting the son, and treating *him* as if he was a gentleman, when we wouldn't sit down at table with his father and mother! It seems to me so wrong and unnatural."

Mr. Walkington shrugged his shoulders. "That is one of the bad consequences of over-educating the working classes. Of course when we get a man of genius there is nothing to be said; genius sets all common rules aside; but I don't suppose that young Gilbert was ever anything but a clever lad, with something of a turn for invention. He may be more, but I should doubt it."

"Uncle Guy thought he was more, you know," Gabrielle said. "I think it was my uncle who did more than anybody else to get him sent to college."

"Well, of course Mr. Dunstan had far

better means than I can have for judging. For my own part, however," said Mr. Walkington, "I must say that, as a general rule, I think it a pity to take a man out of his natural station. George Gilbert, no doubt, has made a good engineer, but we can't tell but what he might have made a still better blacksmith."

They laughed as they stopped at the gate of Wrexham, and Gabrielle held out her hand.

"Good-bye. Aunt Susan is busy, so I won't ask you to come in," she said in her sweetest tone.

"Thank you. I should not have time myself to come in this afternoon." And then he lifted the latch. "The Australian mail will be in to-morrow—will it not?" he said, as he lingered to see her pass in.

"Yes—we shall have our letter to-morrow.—Either our letter, or Uncle Guy himself. I wish it might be Uncle Guy," the girl said. "But it won't!"

CHAPTER VI.

IT turned out, however, that Gabrielle was wrong. The three women were all sitting together on the following afternoon when Aunt Susan suddenly said—"What is that?"—and began to listen.

"Something has set the dogs barking. I think I heard a carriage drive up," Gabrielle answered.

"That is Rover's voice. What can have roused Rover?" repeated Aunt Susan.

And then almost the next instant she started from her seat. "Oh girls!" she exclaimed breathless, and sprang to the door.

But Gabrielle had reached it before her, and Gabrielle, with colour heightened, and her lips apart, was the first to fly across the hall, and get her arm round Mr. Dunstan's neck.

"Oh, uncle!—oh, uncle, to come, and not to tell us!" the girl cried.

"How could I tell you, you unreasonable child?" he answered; and then he put her back from him unceremoniously enough, and went to kiss his sister, who, tender-hearted and ebullient woman as she was, clung to him when she had once hugged him, like a burr, and almost cried over him.

"Oh, my dear, I am so glad! Oh, Guy, my dear, to think that we have got you back at last!" she sobbed.

"Don't I always come back?" Mr. Dun-

stan answered with a laugh. And then, with his arm still round her shoulder—"Where is Nelly?" he said. "Is Nelly all right?" and, without even turning again to Gabrielle, hand in hand with his sister he went into the drawing-room where Helen was lying, and had kissed her, and asked half a dozen more questions about her before he ever gave so much as a look or thought to Gabrielle again.

He turned to her at last, however, and held out his hand to her.

"Well, little one," he said, "and so you were the first to get scent of me? You began to scold me out there too for coming back—didn't you?. You don't much like the notion of having the ogre in the house again?"

"Yes—I received the ogre as if I couldn't

bear to see him—didn't I?" poor Gabrielle replied, a little bitterly, thinking still, not unnaturally, of that half rejected embrace of hers.

"I hardly know how you received me. You came out of your turn, and that put things wrong, you know. Come here again, and let me look at you. You seem pretty plump. She's plump, isn't she, Susan?"

"I don't know that she's plump, but she's very well, dear. She's looking very well," answered Aunt Susan, peering at her lovingly—"and very pretty."

"Pretty, is she?" And he drew her face down to him with a laugh, and looked at it, and kissed it. "And so you are glad to see me again?" he said.

"I am a good deal gladder than you deserve that I should be."

"Why? Because I have said nothing civil to you?" he asked her. "You can get other people to do that. I keep my civil things for Nelly."

"I know you do."

"And Nelly likes them, so she shall have them. As for you, I have got something else for you. You shall unpack it presently, when we have all taken breath a little. But I must enjoy myself first for half an hour. Sit down here now, Susan, and talk to me."

And then they sat down and talked; they did little else for all the rest of that day—talking, indeed, only the faster as hour after hour passed on, and the old familiar feeling of being together again came back more and more, obliterating the first shock and strangeness of the return.

A broad-shouldered, robust, pleasant-looking man, sturdy in build, kindly in nature, with a face that was sensible, honest, strong, and bright. He had brown thick hair, with a crisp curl in it, and a brown, close curling beard—a fine specimen of beard, as thick as a doormat, and an ornament that he regarded with some pride apparently, for he had got into an unconscious trick of caressing it—with, Gabrielle always declared, a peculiar tenderness in his touch, such as he bestowed upon no other object.

"And why should I not? What else have I that is half so near to me?" he coolly answered once when Gabrielle accused him of this special devotion. "*You* are pretty near, but you are not my own property, as my beard is. Tender over it? Yes—why shouldn't I be tender? It has gone through

many a peril with me—it has stuck closer to me through good and evil than you would stick. It's a good beard." And with that he fell to stroking it again in Gabrielle's face defiantly.

Mr. Dunstan was very good friends with Gabrielle, as I have said before; he let her buzz about him always to her heart's content, and he liked her, and was full of kind feeling towards her; but still in his eyes she was but a pretty plaything. Perhaps, indeed, he thought of most pretty women as playthings, and of most plain ones as he did of his sister Susan. For him the feminine world was roughly divided into queen bees and humble bees—the queen bees who were never to do anything useful, but to be petted and teazed and humoured; the humble bees who were to keep the house in order,

and sew on shirt buttons. A reasonable division, he thought, especially when a man could furnish his own peculiar hive, as he had done, with specimens of either species.

He was in his heart very well contented with his womenkind at Wrexham,—indeed was even a little proud of them. Gabrielle, it is true, he suspected would be getting married some of these days, and that would change the establishment a little for the worse; but Susan and Helen might naturally be looked upon as fixtures. At nine and forty his sister was not likely to take a husband, and poor Nelly could not, so he might count on keeping these two; and the thought of this was comfortable to him.

"We shall make a nice little trio in the old place when we've got rid of you," he

would say coolly to Gabrielle. "I think I shall give up wandering, and settle down at home then. I don't do it now, because I should get no peace."

"On account of me?" Gabrielle would ask.

"On account of you—precisely. I'm not strong enough to bear you. A year of you would wear me to skin and bone."

"You have never tried a year yet. You don't know what effect it would have upon you," she would say.

"I can guess the effect. Don't I always stay with you till I can bear it no longer?"

And then the frank eyes would look straight into hers with a kindly laughter in them that neutralised whatever sting there might be in the words.

They had a hundred things to tell him, and more than a hundred things to hear. The last letters that he had had from them were more than four months old; they had been written in February, and it was the end of June now. "How shall we ever be able to remember everything that has happened since February!" Aunt Susan exclaimed. They could not remember everything, of course; but there were a great many things that they were in no danger of forgetting, and all these they told him before the first evening came to an end:—how this person had died, and that been born, and the other been married; how Mr. Walkington had put open seats in the church, to the scandal of half the congregation; how Wilson the coachman had broken his arm one day in March, and Hollis the gardener was

ill with asthma; how Gilbert the blacksmith's son was coming from India next week to recruit his health, and how Mrs. Coulson had fallen in with a mysterious lodger. They kept this last piece of news a little in arrear of all the rest,—not bringing it out eagerly, as they did the other items, but each one consciously reserving it for a little while, with an inward speculation as to whether one of the others would not tell it first,—all three of them vaguely feeling, now that the moment of confession had come, that somehow, good-natured as Guy Dunstan was, it might not perhaps be altogether easy to make him exactly understand the reasons that had made them ready to throw their gates wide to this unknown and somewhat suspicious woman.

It was Gabrielle at last who, with a little

inward, although no visible, nervousness, plunged into the subject. She managed it rather cleverly. She had been called out of the room for something or other, and she chose the moment of her return to it, after ten minutes' absence, to begin to speak.

"We must tell Uncle Guy about Mrs. Hill. Has anybody told him yet about Mrs. Hill?" she asked in the cheerfulest and most innocent tone in the world, as she came back to take possession of her seat again.

"No—I was just thinking—Ahem!—Oh yes, we must tell him of Mrs. Hill," said Aunt Susan, hesitating, but smiling with rather unnatural radiance.

Upon which, of course—"And who is Mrs. Hill?" inquired Uncle Guy.

And then Gabrielle proceeded to tell him.

"And so you have her here every day? Well—it is a kind thing, I daresay," was his comment at the end of the story. "But I should think she was rather an odd sort of woman."

"Yes—she *is* a little odd; that is to say, she is not like other people. But still I think you will be interested in her, Guy," said Aunt Susan, persuasively.

"I shan't be required to see much of her, shall I?" inquired Mr. Dunstan rather hastily. "I suppose it isn't necessary that she should read to me too?"

"Oh no, dear, of course not,—no, no; only, you see,—she stays to luncheon," said Aunt Susan.

"Oh—she stays to luncheon, does she?"

"We couldn't send her away at two o'clock, you know, Guy, without offering her some."

"I don't grudge her her luncheon. She's welcome to luncheon and dinner too,—and any other meals she may have a fancy for, —only I think I should prefer it if she were to let us send them to her at her own house."

"Oh, but, Guy, that would be impossible!" exclaimed Miss Dunstan, in a tone of half alarmed remonstrance.

"Would it? Well, you know best,—so we must submit to her, I suppose. She won't be here to-night, will she?"

"No, no; she only comes once a day, just for these two hours, to read to Nelly."

"And Nelly likes her reading? Well, then, if Nelly likes it, it's all right."

And, upon this, Nelly put out her hand, and said—"Thank you, Uncle Guy." And so the disclosure was made, with—upon the whole—a result that was satisfactory.

Next day Mr. Dunstan saw the widow.

"Did you hear that my Uncle had come home?" Helen asked her, as soon as she entered the room in the morning; and then, instead of going straight to their reading, they talked, or at least Helen talked, for ten minutes about Mr. Dunstan.

"Would you not rather that I did not stay to-day?" Esther asked once, in the midst of the other's communications; but Helen answered cordially—

"Oh no; I should see nothing of my Uncle just now, whether you were here or not. He has gone out with Gabrielle. I

shall see nothing of him till luncheon, at any rate."

And so then Mrs. Hill stayed as usual, and did her customary reading; but when two o'clock came she rose and put her bonnet on.

"I have stayed to luncheon with you while you were alone, but you must let me go now: it is different now that Mr. Dunstan is at home," she said resolutely, when Helen, really vexed at what she was doing, tried eagerly to prevent her.

There was no one except Helen in the room. Perhaps, if Aunt Susan or Gabrielle had been there to back her in her entreaties, they would have had force enough to persuade Mrs. Hill to stay; but, as it was, Helen alone could not persuade her, and she went.

But at the door, as she opened it, to her vexation she came face to face with Gabrielle and Mr. Dunstan just returning home, and Gabrielle, of course, opened her eyes at sight of her, and instantly began to protest.

"Mrs. Hill, where are you going? You are not going home?" she exclaimed. "Surely it is not more than two o'clock? Uncle," she said quickly, turning to him, "this is Mrs. Hill."

Mr. Dunstan raised his hat, and the widow bowed. Then she began to answer Gabrielle.

"Yes—I am going home. I have explained to your sister that I would rather go to-day."

"Oh but, Mrs. Hill—!"

And then there was a pause. Mr. Dun-

stan was quietly looking at the widow: Gabrielle was looking at her too, in a vexed way. "I know you are only going because Uncle Guy has come back," was the sentence that was upon the tip of her tongue; but doubtful as she was of the extent to which her uncle would back her, she could not say this while he was standing by, and so she only looked annoyed, and after a moment or two—

"You must not let me keep you waiting here. Good morning," Mrs. Hill said; and then—for, standing before her, side by side, they had been blocking up the doorway,—Mr. Dunstan stepped back without a word, and bowed again, and Gabrielle said quickly —"I am very vexed with you!"—and Mrs. Hill passed out, and went home.

The moment after she had left them,

with a little flush upon her face, Gabrielle turned round on her companion.

"Uncle, you might have said something! You ought to have said something!" she exclaimed.

"Ought to have said something? What ought I to have said?" Mr. Dunstan coolly inquired.

"You know she has only gone because you are here."

"Well—but if that drives her away, how is it to be prevented? Am I to vacate the house to her?—or ought I have offered to take lunch by myself in the back drawing-room?" said Mr. Dunstan with great composure. After which, for Gabrielle vouchsafed him no reply except an angry and reproachful glance, he walked across the hall, no whit abashed,—nay, even laughing, and

opening the dining-room door—"Susan," he called out, "I'm coming for my first and last lunch with you, for Gabrielle says the sight of me has driven away the widow; so to-morrow I must take a piece of bread and cheese in my pocket, and sit down and eat it under a hedge. You'll cut me a good slice of bread and cheese after breakfast,—won't you?—and then I'll keep off the premises till three o'clock."

"Guy, my dear, what are you talking about?" exclaimed Aunt Susan; and then Gabrielle came forward and told her story in self-defence.

"Aunt Susan, just listen and judge if Uncle Guy behaved courteously or not," the girl said, with the colour still in her face. "Mrs. Hill has gone away just now, and we met her at the door, and it was

quite clear from what she said that she was only going because he had come back, and he saw that—he doesn't deny that he saw it—and yet he never said one single word to ask her to stay!"

"Certainly I did not. If it offends a lady to sit down at table with me, how can I press her to do it?" asked Mr. Dunstan, with perfect readiness and good temper.

"Oh, but, my dear, it couldn't offend her! How could you imagine such a thing?" exclaimed Aunt Susan in a tone of distress.

"I didn't imagine it, Susan. It's Gabrielle who imagines it. It's Gabrielle altogether who says that the widow won't have lunch with me. What have you got over there? Veal pie?" said Mr. Dunstan. "Give me

some of it. We've had such a busy morning."

And then he proceeded to narrate their morning's doings, and Gabrielle bit her lip and sat down in silence; and nothing more was said about Mrs. Hill till the three women met in the drawing-room after lunch, and talked the little vexation over.

"I can't think how Uncle Guy could behave so oddly. It is not like him," Gabrielle said then in a tone of annoyance.

"Well, no doubt it is a little vexing,—but yet, you see, there was some awkwardness about it altogether," said Aunt Susan meditatively. "I don't think he at all meant to be uncourteous to her,—but still how could he exactly have asked her not to go? He couldn't say to her—'Don't let my being

here make any difference,'—because of course he couldn't assume that it *was* his being here that was making the difference. You see, Gabrielle, that would have been impossible."

And then Gabrielle, though she was angry, was obliged to acknowledge that he could not have said that,—and that, indeed, she did not quite know what it was that with any fitness he *could* have said.

"But at any rate she must not go again. Whether Uncle Guy holds his tongue or not, *you* must prevent her from going to-morrow, Aunt Susan," was the only satisfactory response that she could make, and with this conclusion they all agreed.

But when the next day came, at ten minutes to two o'clock it was not Aunt

Susan who entered Helen's room to mount guard over Mrs. Hill, lest she should slip again through their fingers, but, to everybody's surprise, it was Mr. Dunstan. Aunt Susan indeed came afterwards, but it was her brother who made his appearance there first, and whom, on her entrance, she found already seated at the foot of Helen's couch, quietly talking to the widow.

He had a pleasant manner that, when he chose, put people at ease with him; there was a certain bright geniality about him; he had a contagious laugh, and a sort of careless breezy freshness in his way of talking. Frank-hearted, open-natured, healthy, joyous, he was in almost everything the utter opposite of the sad-looking, statuesque woman whom his keen grey eyes were watching without appearing to watch dur-

ing those ten minutes before the clock struck. He made her talk to him a little. Once or twice he even made her smile. But they might have been two creatures from two different worlds as they sat there face to face—the one born of the sunlight, with energy and strength and hope for his birthright; the other, not *born* of the night indeed, but plunged into the night, and given ashes for food, and a heritage of woe and pain.

She did not rise up to-day to put her bonnet on. She had been roundly scolded already for having gone yesterday, and an unwilling promise had been wrung from her that this morning at least she would remain. She sat still therefore till the servant announced that luncheon was ready, and when they moved into the dining-room she passively let Mr. Dunstan assign her a seat

on his right hand,—filling that place, as he himself described it afterwards, not much unlike the skeleton at an Egyptian feast. "At least," he added, "as far as the cheerfulness of her appearance went. In other respects she has some decided advantages over her prototype, I confess. If I were a painter I should like to make a picture out of her. That face of hers deserves to be painted certainly."

"Yes—does it not? Is it not a beautiful face?" asked Gabrielle when he said this. "I do little but sit and look at her all the time she is here. Now, does she not make you curious, Uncle Guy? Do you not want to know something more about her?"

But Mr. Dunstan, who would have scorned to allow that any man ever knew

what curiosity meant, laughed aloud at this inquiry.

"Not I!" he said. "What should I want to know? She has lost her husband, poor soul, and I daresay she was fond of him. Depend upon it that's her whole story from beginning to end. As for making a mystery out of her, and imagining that she has suffered indescribable things—!" He broke into another laugh. "You only do it because she takes you in by looking as if she had stepped off a pedestal. You would all give yourselves mighty little concern about her, I suspect, if she had a muddy complexion and a snub nose."

He was saying this while Esther Hill was walking home, vexed and dissatisfied.

"I cannot go through this every day," she was thinking to herself. "I could only

just endure it before, but now—! To have to sit every day by that man's side, and be expected to listen to him and talk to him as if I was like any other woman! Oh, I cannot do it! If they force me to go on doing it I shall break down some day, and tell them everything, and end it all, merely to escape from the mockery of it. But they will not force me. I will ask them to make some other arrangement. They are very good. Surely they will do it if I ask them."

And then, as she walked on, she thought over what she would say to them in the morning, so that she might be able to make them understand how the present arrangement pained her.

It was not such an easy matter, however, to make them understand. They were all

against her when she spoke to them on the following day. It is true that each one of them in her heart felt that the presence of the sad looking woman at their table was more or less of a restraint and an oppression, and yet almost the more for their feeling this, and out of kind anxiety lest she should think they felt it, did each one in turn press her to stay. But in the end she gained her point.

"You cannot think that I am asking you for what I hope you will not grant. You have all been so kind to me already. Let me have my own way now, for one more kindness," she said.

And then they gave in. "You shall do what you like, my dear," Aunt Susan said. "If it would please you better, come to us

for the future in the afternoon. Come at three o'clock—and nobody shall worry you any more."

And after this Mrs. Hill thought and hoped that the matter was settled and ended.

But she was wrong, for it was not ended yet. She had bidden good-bye to them, and had left the house, when, just as she had got to the gate into the road and was about to lift the latch, with a feeling of annoyance she suddenly saw Mr. Dunstan not three yards before her, coming towards the gate too.

"I'll open it for you. It's a heavy cumbersome sort of gate—isn't it?" he said the instant he saw her, taking a couple of steps towards her, and addressing her without

any more formal greeting. "But where are you going?" he asked the next moment.

"I am going home," she said.

"Why—lunch isn't over, is it?"

"No, it is not over," she said.

"Then why are you going home without any?"

He had opened the gate wide enough for her to pass through, and was standing leaning over it, looking at her.

"It suits me best to go."

She said this rather haughtily, and then she stepped into the road, and would have passed on; but he stood upright suddenly, and rather startlingly arrested her.

"Mrs. Hill, I am going your way," he said.

She stood still in an instant, and turned

to him with a flush of angry colour in her face.

"You were going home!" she said quickly.

"Yes, I *was* going home, but I want now to speak to you first. Just be good enough to walk on, and let me walk a few steps with you." And then, as he put himself at her side,—"Don't you see that you are placing me in a very ungracious position?" he at once asked her bluntly. "I find you when I come home to a certain extent domesticated with my people here, but the instant I appear you break the familiar habits you had fallen into, and refuse to sit down at the same table with me. Now, I don't say that this may not be agreeable to you, but it is not agreeable to me, nor, as it seems to me (excuse me for speaking plainly), have you any reasonable right to

make me feel—as you do make me feel at present—like a nuisance in my own house."

"Mr. Dunstan!" she said.

She had listened to him at first looking steadily straight before her, but at his last sentence her face had turned round hurriedly to him, and she had lifted up her eyes, with a startled, deprecating look in them. The sudden ejaculation too had a tone of entreaty in it, and even of pain. It took him a little by surprise; perhaps it even moved him in a way he had not quite looked for.

"I don't want to vex you, you know," he said quickly. "I am a stranger to you, and of course I have no right to dictate to you, or perhaps to say anything to you at all; but yet, upon my word,"—with something of a return to his first manner,—"I don't

think that you treat me quite fairly."

They were walking side by side, rather rapidly, for he was tolerably angry, and walked faster than he was quite conscious of, and she too was not altogether calm, as was evident from the colour in her face. She was not calm enough to answer what he said at once; perhaps she could hardly in a moment make up her mind in what tone to answer it. They had walked in silence for several minutes before she said,—

"I suppose you have a right to be offended—certainly you have a right, if you think that I am doing what you accuse me of merely out of caprice or discourtesy: but that is not so. Once for all I tell you that. I neither go away to annoy you, nor are you driving me away. I go simply because——"

And then there was a moment or two's silence, and she turned round upon him suddenly without finishing her sentence, and—

"Do I need to tell you why? Can you not understand it?" she said, with a sort of suppressed passion. "Do you think I am fit to sit at happy tables, with people who are merry and light-hearted?"

"More fit for that than to sit alone, I should say, and brood over your troubles," he replied composedly. "You had far better do it, at any rate. Besides, you seemed to think yourself fit for it before I came home."

"You are wrong. I never thought myself fit for it. I could hardly bear it even then."

"And now that I have come back, you

mean, you find yourself wholly unable to bear it at all? Then the literal truth is that I *am* driving you away,—which is just what I said at first."

And then there was a pause, and they walked on for some twenty steps in silence. After that it was she first who began to speak.

"I have received too much kindness from your family to be indifferent to the thought of vexing any of you," she said. "But ought you to be vexed with me?" And as she said this she turned her face suddenly round to him again. "Say that I let your coming home send me away, is it not better that it should be so? Is it not better that I should say to you frankly, as I say now, that I should only spoil your pleasant hours together? Why should I not speak the

truth to you? If I tell it to you, and ask you not to be offended with me, need you still be angry?"

Her eyes were raised to him,—a pair of clear grey eyes that had lost for the moment their frequent look of cold and weary withdrawal from common things, and were filled with earnestness, and natural womanly pleading. She was thinking little enough herself of how beautiful they were, but *he* looked at them, and took note of it.

"I am not angry," he replied to her. "I am not angry, but I think you are wrong. If one has sorrows it is a bad thing to shut oneself up with them. That's how people get morbid."

"It depends upon what their sorrows are," she replied in a low voice. "You don't know what mine have been.—No,

you do not!" she repeated quickly, and even with a sort of defiance when he made no answer to her. "I know what your silence means. You think you know what I have had to bear—that is what every one thinks, till I hate to look at myself in my black dress,—till——"

In the middle of her sentence she suddenly broke off, and there was another moment or two's silence; and then all at once—

"Can you not believe that I have troubles of which you know nothing? Can you not believe that and let me alone?" she exclaimed. "It seems so hard to me sometimes that you will try to force me to be a hypocrite by preaching to me about things that you do not understand, and expecting me to submit to you, and to acquiesce.

You know that my husband is dead—yes, you know that!—but does the loss of a husband include the whole catalogue of a woman's woes, do you think?"

There was an angry impatience and almost passion in her tone through these last sentences that contrasted strangely with her ordinary manner. It was a little bit of true nature breaking through the frozen crust within which she usually enclosed and concealed herself,—breaking through, too, at a curious moment, to a stranger who knew nothing of her. But she had been worried and tried too much this morning, and the artificial composure had given way at last.

Nor, having once given way, was it regained in a moment. She walked on rapidly for a little while, neither he nor she

speaking again; then all at once she stood still, and turned her face to him.

"Why do you come all this way with me? Have you not said all you wanted to say yet?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I think I have," he answered quietly. "And you are very angry with me for having said it?" he added, with a little trace of a smile upon his lips; and then when she made no reply, after a moment he held out his hand.

"Well, you oughtn't to be angry, because you have beaten me, you see," he said. "And, besides, I didn't mean to say anything to hurt you; believe that."

"I beg your pardon for having been angry," she said quickly; and then the grey eyes—saddest eyes, he thought, that he had ever seen—went up to his face again.

The look of them haunted him after he had shaken hands with her, and turned away. "A curious woman!" he said to himself, and he could not get the thought of her out of his head as he walked back home. In the dining-room at Wrexham he found the others taking their lunch, and he told them frankly what he had been about.

"I met the widow at the gate, and I've been talking to her," he said. "So she has settled it all with you, I suppose, and she is resolved that I shall turn her out of the house?"

"Well—she shrinks so from seeing strangers, poor thing; that is it, you see," Aunt Susan said apologetically. "I think we had better let her have her own way for a time. Perhaps you may be the first man she has had to do with since her hus-

band died, my dear. I shouldn't wonder though you were, and that it is the thought of that that upsets her."

At which sympathetic and ingenious speech, to confess the truth, her brother looked at her with something very like laughter in his eyes.

"Ah, that's an idea that never occurred to me!" he said.

CHAPTER VII.

"I THINK you will find young Gilbert something of a rough diamond," Leigh Walkington remarked, with a slightly supercilious sneer one afternoon.

Mr. Walkington was sitting in the drawing-room at Wrexham, with the two girls and Aunt Susan, making one of his frequent calls. These calls had been a little less frequent and a little less prolonged during the few weeks that had elapsed since Mr. Dunstan's return, but the household still continued to enjoy a good deal of his society,—rather

more of it, perhaps, than the master of the house quite liked. Mr. Dunstan, however, so far, had been perfectly civil to the young clergyman,—at any rate, to his face. Behind his back he had, indeed, said one or two not altogether respectful things of him, and he might probably have said more, and in a more public way, if he had not been pacified by Gabrielle's amused reception of such expressions of his opinion as had on a few occasions escaped him. For he had not the least desire that Gabrielle should fall in love with Mr. Walkington, and therefore her amusement in these circumstances had been rather soothing to him.

"You have not seen young Gilbert yet? Well, you will find him, when you do, something of a rough diamond, I think," said Mr. Walkington, with his slight gentlemanly

laugh. "Of course, I don't mean," he added quickly, in an off-hand way, "that I doubt his being a very worthy fellow, but he is amazingly heavy and silent, and not very agreeable in manner, I should say. A big, powerful-looking man—very like his father. Indeed, one is rather tempted to think, in looking at him," said Mr. Walkington, and laughed again, "that it is a pity he didn't follow his father's trade, for he certainly, as far as thews and sinews go, would have made a first-rate blacksmith."

"I like big men," remarked Gabrielle, coolly.

"I believe, indeed, he does do some blacksmith's work, for I hear he spends a good deal of his time in the forge."

"Well, and why should he not, when his father has to be there?" said Helen.

"Oh, I don't find fault with him for doing it."

But Mr. Walkington shrugged his shoulders a little, nevertheless.

"Mr. Walkington, I wonder what *you* would have done if you had been born the son of a blacksmith!"

This rude suggestion of course came from Gabrielle, and it brought the colour to the young man's face, for the Walkingtons prided themselves on the blue blood in their veins.

"I am afraid I have never tried to imagine myself in that position," he said, drily.

"But yet you might have been, you know—just as I might have been the daughter of a washerwoman, or an old Jew. I wonder what you would have

done? If you had once got to college and taken orders, I don't think you would have come back to pay many visits to the cottage at home: do you think you would?" asked Gabrielle.

"I hope that, in whatever station I had been born, I should have obeyed the Divine command to honour my parents."

This was said very stiffly, in a clerical tone.

"Yes—but you would have liked best to honour them at a distance, wouldn't you? You would have found it much nicer to obey the Divine command in your study here at the parsonage than if you were sitting with them in their kitchen,—somewhere in the midland counties, suppose?"

"Gabrielle, my dear!" exclaimed Aunt Susan, scandalized.

But Gabrielle unluckily knew what licence her tongue might take with Mr. Walkington. She knew that she might laugh at him, and speak scornfully to him to-day, and send him away with his face burning at her ridicule, and that, if she chose to look at him, he would come back to her to-morrow. Therefore, when Aunt Susan exclaimed, "Oh, Gabrielle!" Gabrielle proceeded with her speech as composedly as if Miss Dunstan had said nothing.

"Don't you think you would?" she said. "You wouldn't find that sitting in the kitchen with them did much to quicken your filial feelings? You wouldn't like the smell of the boiled beans and bacon,—nor the porridge they might give you for breakfast instead of your coffee and toasted muffins? And when you came back here to

the parsonage, perhaps you wouldn't tell many people in the parish where you had been? Perhaps obeying the Divine command wouldn't seem to you quite to include the necessity of telling any of us that you had a father or mother at all?"

The girl was sitting in one of her luxurious favourite chairs as she made her speech,—sitting there, careless and audacious, with her idle hands before her. She wanted somebody who had authority over her to be present and make her hold her tongue, but Mr. Dunstan was the only person who had authority over her, and Mr. Dunstan was not here.

There would not have been so much offence in her words if they had been spoken in play, but they were not more than half spoken in play, and, moreover,

there was too much truth in them (which was the defence, though an untenable one, that she herself would have made for speaking them at all) for the young man to listen to them without wincing. The colour was still in his face as he replied—

"You are at liberty, of course, to suppose anything you please. I shall never have it in my power—unfortunately, perhaps—to prove that in this instance what you think is either right or wrong. I don't know, however, that I need be ashamed of saying frankly that I am *glad* I am not a blacksmith's son."

"Oh, as far as that goes we are quite at one. *I* am glad too that my mother was not a washerwoman," answered Gabrielle with perfect sweetness. "Though still, you know, that doesn't touch the root of the matter,

which is, whether you would have behaved as well as George Gilbert is doing if you had been in his place,—whether you would have gone and hammered out horseshoes, I mean, and spent your mornings in your father's forge."

The young man had risen up to take his departure after he had spoken last.

"Are you going?" she said, and held out her hand to the white aristocratic hand he offered her, with a diamond ring on its little finger. "I suppose, you know, the first difficulty in your case would have been that you *couldn't* have hammered out horseshoes," she said, with the slightest delicate touch in her tone of feminine scorn.

And then Mr. Walkington made his adieux with the angry blood tingling in his veins,—and good Aunt Susan, as soon as he

was gone, fell to administering one of those feeble, kindly, impotent lectures of hers, at which self-willed Gabrielle always laughed.

"For if I say what is true, why should I not say it?" the girl would constantly ask. "And what right has a finical, fine gentleman like that to sneer at the roughness of such a man as George Gilbert?" she exclaimed to-day. "He may be as rough as a bear, for anything I know, but, whatever he is, he has done what Leigh Walkington would never do though he had a thousand years to do it in! No, I am not standing up for young Gilbert, nor running down Mr. Walkington, Aunt Susan, nor thinking for a moment that blacksmiths' sons are better than born gentlemen. If Mr. Walkington had not been born a gentleman, he

would not have been endurable at all: it is his gentlemanliness that is the best thing about him; and as for young Gilbert, because he has *not* been born a gentleman, I don't suppose that I should ever care to exchange, or know how to exchange, six sentences with him; but yet, for all that, if you place them side by side, I know that the one of them is a poor creature—a mere apology for a man—compared with the other. And Mr. Walkington ought to know that too—that is what makes me so angry,—that he can't tell a man who is worth ten men like himself when he sees him."

"But, my dear, whose judgment is it that decides that young Gilbert is worth ten men like Mr. Walkington?" inquired Aunt Susan in answer to this tirade. "You have such a one-sided, arbitrary way of

asserting things, Gabrielle! Of course George Gilbert is a remarkable young man —we all know that; but as for taking it for granted before you have ever seen him that he is ten times better than Mr. Walkington—"

"I shouldn't wonder that he might be *twenty* times better, Aunt Susan! I'll say twenty times, if you like. A man might be that, and yet not be worth so very much," said wilful Gabrielle.

And then the little dispute ended, as little disputes between these two often did, by the one laughing, and the other in meek helplessness shaking her head.

And so, in a certain sense, Gabrielle may be said to have remained the victor at the end of this discussion; but it was a little notable that two days after this, when she

happened for the first time to see Mr. Gilbert, her accomplishment of that business seemed to fill her with a curious reserve, in so much that she in no wise troubled herself to repeat, with the decision that would then have been more reasonable, nor indeed to repeat at all, the assertion she had so glibly made to-day respecting the extent of his superiority to Mr. Walkington.

Indeed, to tell the truth, it so happened that her brief sight of him upon this first occasion chanced not to be quite happily timed.

The Gilberts' cottage stood next door to Mrs. Coulson's, and the forge adjoined it. They were a pair of semi-detached houses, with their two doors side by side, so that, if you walked up the garden path of one and the door of the other happened to be

standing open, you had almost of necessity a view of that adjacent interior.

Gabrielle wanted to speak to Esther Hill one morning, and, going for that purpose to Mrs. Coulson's cottage, as she passed up the little garden walk she came into very close proximity to the two Gilberts, father and son, who chanced at the moment (it was about eleven o'clock) to be engaged in the satisfactory but homely business of discussing an early lunch of bread and cheese and porter. The morning was hot, and the blacksmith's son was sitting in his shirt sleeves, with his shirt collar thrown open and a pewter pot at his lips. Moreover he was seated, not after the customary manner of gentlemen, but on a corner of the kitchen table, and upon his face was a, probably unconscious, smear of soot, which,

caught somehow in the forge, had made a smudgy line across his forehead, and half way down one cheek.

Coming daintily in her pretty light-coloured summer garments up the garden path, Gabrielle saw this grimy apparition, and opened her eyes at it with something of a start. "Is *that* George Gilbert?" the girl thought. She had been a little disposed to make a small hero of the young man during these two last days since she had taken his part against Mr. Walkington, but I am afraid that the sight of the blacked face, and the pewter pot, and the seat made of the kitchen table, brought on a somewhat rapid and precipitate revulsion in her mind. For it was one thing to imagine a blacksmith's son with a refined soul aiding his father at his forge out of pure filial love

and reverence, and another thing altogether to see a brawny young man reposing himself upon the kitchen table after his forging labours, and (apparently with no more thought of his refined soul than the blacksmith might have had himself) enjoying bread and cheese and beer in his shirt-sleeves, with a smudge across his face. He looked at Gabrielle too as she came through the adjoining garden, and never so much as relinquished the pewter pot as his eye followed her up the path. Old Gilbert *père* saw her, and came forward from some inner part of the kitchen to touch his forelock to her at the house door; but the son (as well as Gabrielle could perceive behind the blacksmith's stalwart figure) stuck sturdily to the seat, and never budged an inch.

"I saw George Gilbert just now as I came

in. I—I had thought he would look a good deal more like a gentleman," Gabrielle said a few minutes afterwards to Esther Hill.

"Do you not think he is like a gentleman? I have only seen him two or three times in the garden, but I thought his appearance was very much in his favour," Mrs. Hill answered.

"Well—I don't know," said Gabrielle dubiously; and then she described in rather vivid colours the picture that she had seen as she came up the path.

"Of course there was no harm in what he was doing,—only somehow he looked as if it was all so natural to him. An ordinary gentleman *might* do the same thing, but I don't think he could possibly look as much at home in doing it as young Gilbert did," Gabrielle said.

"Possibly not: only I don't know that that says much against him," Mrs. Hill replied indifferently.

And then the matter dropped; and Gabrielle when she went home merely said,—"I saw George Gilbert for a moment as I went up to Mrs. Hill's this morning,—but I could only just glance at him; I don't suppose I should know him again." And she did not utter a single word touching his manifest superiority to Mr. Walkington.

It was a few days after this that, being out with Gabrielle, Mr. Dunstan suddenly stopped at the corner of a road, and hailed a figure that he saw advancing towards them.

"That's young Gilbert: I want to speak to him," he said, and he stood still till the young man came up to them: then—"I

was thinking of coming to you. Can you walk our way?" he asked; and, as they moved on together, he just gave a little nod at Gabrielle, who had her hand tucked into his arm, and—"You don't know my niece, do you?" he said.

"No," answered Mr. Gilbert bluntly; and then he looked at Gabrielle and bowed, and Gabrielle returned his bow, thinking to herself the while in her vain little heart that, considering what the young man was, her uncle might have paid enough respect to her to have introduced her to him in a somewhat less off-hand way.

But Mr. Dunstan, wholly unconscious of what she was thinking, or at any rate wholly indifferent to it, plunged at once into what he had to say, and marched on conversing with his companion, as disre-

gardful of her presence as if he had merely had Rover the old pointer at his side.

Probably, had it been any one but her uncle who had treated her with this sort of brusquerie, Gabrielle would hardly have submitted to it; but somehow, wilful and self-assertive as the girl was, she had got into a way of understanding when it was well for her to submit to Mr. Dunstan, and of usually, by a kind of instinct, knowing in his presence when it was wisest to hold her tongue. So, though at this moment she resented being treated as if she had been Rover, yet she had the grace and the sense to keep her resentment to herself, and for half an hour she paced by Mr. Dunstan's side, silently contemplating the country road before her—listening a little to what the two men were saying, but not

troubling herself much even to do that, for their talk was uninteresting to her ("all about steam engines and things of that sort," was her own description of it afterwards), and hardly a sentence of it was she able, even when she did listen, thoroughly to understand.

But yet, incapable as she was either of appreciating the worth, or comprehending the import of what they said, still to a certain extent, to give her her due, this dull talk of theirs instinctively approved itself to her. For Gabrielle Lynn was very ignorant, but she had a sort of natural reverence and respect for learning; she did not like study in her own person, but she heartily approved of other people's liking it: she had a horror of science (so she said), but in her heart she admired a man who

could talk with wisdom and knowledge of scientific things. As she listened at moments in her slight inattentive way to these two men as they talked together now, I think that, unconsciously, her respect for George Gilbert rather returned again. The matter of their talk, indeed, was merely all as so much dead rubbish to her, but the manner of it impressed her rather in a way she liked. For she liked to be made to feel a certain confidence in people—a confidence that a doctor knew his profession, that a carpenter knew his trade, that a clergyman understood his calling; and so she instinctively liked it when she perceived that the young engineer talked very certainly as if he knew what he was talking about.

Grave, strong, earnest talk it was,—very

unintelligible to Gabrielle, but at least with a tone about it to make her feel that. Yet still, I must repeat, very unintelligible, so that she yawned before the half hour came to an end, and wished that they would stop talking, and felt very tired of holding her own tongue.

They had made a round, and were wending their steps homewards.

"Does Uncle Gilbert mean to bring him in?" Gabrielle was beginning to think to herself.

But before they had quite reached their own gate, Mr. Gilbert suddenly took out his watch.

"I must bid you good-bye. I have an engagement at six," he said quietly.

"Can't you come home with us?" Mr. Dunstan asked.

"No—not to-day,"—and then he held out his hand.

"Come and dine with us to-morrow then —will you?"

The young man hesitated for a moment; then said—

"Thank you—I would rather take my chance some day of finding you at home."

"But I shall be *certain* to be at home at dinner-time to-morrow. Why can't you come then? Nonsense, George," said Mr. Dunstan half-impatiently,—"I won't let you off."

"Very well; I'll come." And then he raised his hat to Gabrielle, and went his way.

"And so he is really coming to dinner!" said Gabrielle ten minutes afterwards. "Aunt Susan, do you think he will want to

sit on the dining-table, and drink porter out of a pewter pot? I *hope* he won't want to sit on the dining-table" said the girl with mock earnestness, "for it would look so odd to the servants. I almost think it would frighten Wilkins into fits."

"My dear, how can you say anything so absurd? As if the poor young man was more likely to want to sit upon the table than any of the rest of us!" exclaimed Aunt Susan.

"Well, I don't know. We seem to be beginning to know such odd people now, you see," Gabrielle said. "There is Mrs. Hill, who won't sit down in the dining-room at all, and Mr. Gilbert, who will come to dinner in his shirt-sleeves, perhaps, with a smut across his face."

"My dear—my dear!" cried Aunt Susan.

But Gabrielle, who was wickedly fond of shocking Aunt Susan, vouchsafed no explanation, but simply looked in that good woman's face and laughed.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS DUNSTAN good-naturedly tried to make much of Mr. Gilbert, when he dined with them next day. "I daresay he will be rather shy and awkward, poor young man," she said; and on this assumption she received the big young engineer with extreme kindness, and took him under her wing at dinner, and talked to him, and kept an eye upon his plate and his proceedings generally, in the kind-hearted womanly hope of shielding him from Gabrielle's satirical observation should he happen (as he probably would, she thought)

in the course of the entertainment to convey peas or gravy to his mouth upon his knife, or to disfigure his wine-glass with the marks of his lips, or to neglect to use his table-napkin, or in some other similar way to betray an ignorance (that was only to be expected, the kind woman thought) of the common rules of refined society.

In her eagerness to act this charitable part, the good soul, it is true, forgot, what even Gabrielle herself, though she chose to laugh and jest over the matter, did not forget, that the blacksmith's son, though still undeniably capable of eating his meals, and enjoying them too, after the fashion of his fathers, was not likely at this time to be either ignorant of the rules of ordinary society, or ill at ease in his own observance of them, seeing that for ten years he had

lived with educated men; but her innocent forgetfulness of this fact took nothing away from the kindliness of her intention. She watched over him none the less good-naturedly that she watched in vain.

"It is really wonderful, my dear, how much he has got to be like other people! I assure you, Nelly, if I hadn't known, I should never have guessed that he had not been accustomed to dine like us all his life," she said in the drawing-room, when she and Gabrielle had left the two gentlemen over their wine. "And as for his manner—why, his manner is just what you would wish it to be. It isn't polished, of course, and he doesn't seem to have much to say to ladies—well, you couldn't expect that he should; but it's nice, and straightforward, and sensible."

"And, in short, he is going to be one of Aunt Susan's pets," Gabrielle said. "He will be rather an unmanageable pet, however, I fancy. If I were you, Aunt Susan, I would be cautious about stroking him too much. Like Rover, I suspect, he might look askance at you, if you did, and snarl."

"My dear Gabrielle, what nonsense you talk!" said Aunt Susan.

But Gabrielle was in rather a mocking humour, and persisted in going on talking nonsense.

In fact Gabrielle had found the dinner dull, and had slightly lost her temper over it. She had been taken so little notice of by anybody. Mr. Gilbert had not opened his lips to her (she did not mind that, she said), and her uncle had devoted himself to

his guest (and that she did mind). She had been of no importance whatever to any one, for even Aunt Susan had had no eyes for her; and if there was a thing that vain Gabrielle hated it was to find herself of no importance. It did not suit her—it was not good for her—it made her cross and ill-tempered.

She came into the drawing-room, thinking that she did not much like George Gilbert, with his grave face, and his head full of engines and inventions. She cared a great deal for geniuses, but she did not care much, she thought, for geniuses whose gift only lay in the direction of engineering. That was but a poor development of the divine faculty, it seemed to her; and she shrugged her pretty shoulders presently, as she sat down to read by one of the open

windows till the two gentlemen should come in to coffee. If Mr. Walkington at this moment had chanced to be at hand, and to have repeated his former observation that George Gilbert was a rough diamond, I doubt very much if Gabrielle would have taken the trouble to dispute his judgment, or would have been at all disposed to stand up for the young man in the way that she had done a week ago. She opened her book, and she lay back comfortably in her easy-chair, but she yawned a little as she began to read it. Life was a dull thing sometimes: how sleepy it made one! Gabrille thought.

Mr. Dunstan and his guest came into the drawing-room in the twilight, but I do not know that Gabrielle gained very much by that. Mr. Gilbert was evidently shy of

ladies,—and of young ladies especially. He talked a little to Aunt Susan, and, won by that good woman's kindness, he talked to her, when the ice was broken, pleasantly enough; but he kept at a safe distance both from Gabrielle and Helen. Perhaps it was not to be expected—perhaps it would hardly even have been to be desired—that here, in the village in which his father had lived and worked for fifty years, he could have been wholly at ease in society so far above his father's station. In other places he mixed easily with educated people, indifferent as to whether they knew his parentage or not, but here he found that he could not do it without a certain sensitiveness. With his host, indeed, he felt no difficulty, for Mr. Dunstan's cordial manner made it impossible not to be at home with

him; but with these two girls the case was different. The one in her invalid's chair, with her sickly faded face, kindled some interest in him, and had she made any advance to him he might have met her half way not unwillingly; but Helen Lynn did not often care to give herself unnecessary trouble, and she was a little proud and supercilious too, and did not feel at this moment that she was specially called upon to entertain the blacksmith's son. So she merely bowed when he was introduced to her, and then limited her attentions during the evening to the interchange with him of a couple of sentences.

And as for Gabrielle—Gabrielle sat in her white dress by the window, with a bright ribbon in her hair, and her fair young face looking like something removed

miles away out of George Gilbert's sphere. At least that was how it seemed to him. She on her part would have talked to him (not perhaps without a certain sense of condescension, but still she would have done it) if he had come up and talked to her, but he did not know that, and would no more, on his part, have thought of addressing her without a special invitation to do so, than he would have thought of addressing some fair young creature who might pass him in the street, or who might chance to look at him through a carriage window.

And so the evening passed on, and Gabrielle gave more than one additional yawn before it ended. Mr. Dunstan liked his guest, and (perhaps with some little selfish disregard of other tastes except his own) talked to him almost without ceasing

on his own subjects. Left to himself, Mr Gilbert would probably have found something to say on other than scientific subjects, but, except for the ten minutes during which Aunt Susan took possession of him, Mr. Dunstan did not leave him to himself at all; and so, when he went at last, it was not perhaps without some reason that Gabrielle broke out into a little impatient speech.

"Like him?" she said to her uncle, in reply to a question that he put to her. "You might as soon ask me if I liked a water-pump or a galvanic battery! I never knew a man before whose whole soul seemed so to have turned into machinery."

"His whole soul has no more turned into machinery than yours has. You are a foolish child! The young fellow has more

stuff in him than—[illegible] comprehend," Mr. Duncan [illegible] this scornfully.

And then Gabrielle laughed in her [illegible] feminine way, and—

"I shall never *try* to comprehend him,—you may be very sure of that, Uncle Guy. If he has to wait for me to understand him he will wait a very long time indeed," she said.

Mr. Gilbert had bowed very formally to her when he was about to take his leave, and would have gone away with no other greeting than that if she had not held out her hand to him,—a little act of graciousness that she had performed not perhaps wholly without an air of conscious condescension. "For, after all, whether he is a genius or not, it *is* an odd thing to find

oneself shaking hands with old Gilbert's son," was the thought that was in her mind as their palms met. That thought,—and also this other (which indeed had been in her mind for the greater part of the evening), that on the whole it was better—more pleasant and simple and comfortable—to be born a gentleman than a genius. It was best to be born both, of course; but, if you had to choose one lot or the other, it would decidedly be wisest, Gabrielle thought, to choose to be a gentleman.

"For when it is the other way it makes one so uncomfortable, you see," the girl said to Helen presently, as she was wishing her good night. "It wouldn't be natural that George Gilbert could ever be at ease with *us*, and yet it isn't nice to have him coming here and feeling that he can't be at

ease. Of course it would be quite different anywhere else, but I can't think how it is ever to be anything but awkward to have to do with him here, with his father and mother in the place."

"I think it was foolish of him to come here at all," Helen answered. "He ought to have understood what the difficulty would be quite well. But his head is far too full of his engines, I suppose, for him to think about such a thing."

"Oh!—well—I don't know that. I rather think he understands it," Gabrielle said.

There was no doubt that George Gilbert understood it: he understood that and a good many other things rather better than Helen Lynn thought. As he walked home to his father's cottage to-night he was think-

ing over the evening with a little vexation.

"I should have been wiser if I had stuck to my refusal," he said to himself. "This sort of thing is a mistake here. It might do if I were ten years younger, and just beginning to make my way, but, as it is, I can't either take my own position amongst them, nor the one that they think I should take. I should have to steer an artificial middle course that would be natural or comfortable to no one. So I will have nothing to do with it all—that will be the only honest course." And then after a little while—"She was a pretty butterfly of a thing—that girl in the white dress," he thought; "but she made a mistake just now in giving me her proud white hand."

And the young man laughed to himself as he said this, with rather a scornful little sudden laugh.

The fire was burning in the cottage kitchen, and the old blacksmith and his wife were sitting up until their son should come back. He had to tell them how he had passed the evening when he came in, and to describe this thing and that to them.

"There's not a better man than Mr. Dunstan for ten miles round,—not a better man, nor a truer gentleman," the old blacksmith said. He was proud enough of his son, and yet he felt as if it was a sort of honour to him that he had been to dine at Wrexham.

"And the young Misses—did you see them too, George?—and were they nice to you?" his mother asked.

"Well—what do you call nice?" he answered with a laugh. "One of them told me that it was very cold for June, and the other asked me if I had ever seen Mrs. Hill. They said one or two other things to me besides, I daresay,—so—well, I suppose, they *were* nice, mother."

"The sick one was very pretty once. You'd hardly think it, but she was almost as pretty when they first came here as Miss Gabrielle."

"Miss Gabrielle's a bright young slip of a thing," the blacksmith said. "*She* would talk to you now, didn't she?"

"Yes, she said a few words to me."

"I thought she'd have done more than that. I always think there's not a bit of pride about Miss Gabrielle," said Mrs. Gilbert.

"They say she's going to marry yon whipper-snapper," said the blacksmith, tossing his thumb over his shoulder as he rose up to go to bed.

"Who's that?" asked his son.

"Young Walkington."

"Oh! they say that, do they? She might do better, I think."

"Ay, so *I* think too,"—and the blacksmith gave a laugh. "But when a woman takes a thing into her head what's the use of saying aught to her?"

But, as you know, Gabrielle was *not* going to marry Mr. Walkington.

"Do people say that of me? What a horrible, gossipping place this is!" the girl cried one day, in an outbreak of indignation, when some one spoke of the report to her. "As if one could not be friendly with

a person, and—and talk to him now and then without having things of that sort said!"

"Do you think they are often said when we are merely friendly with people? Do you think they are often said without some sort of ground for them?" Mrs. Hill upon this asked her; for it was Mrs. Hill who had purposely repeated the piece of gossip to her, and it was in her parlour that they were talking.

Gabrielle looked into her face at this inquiry, angry, but flushing a little with something that was *not* quite innocence perhaps, and—

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "If you mean that there is anything—" And then she stopped.

"Anything between you and Mr. Walk-

ington?" Mrs. Hill said, finishing the sentence for her. "No, I don't think there is anything on your part; but I think that Mr. Walkington cares for you," she said quietly, "and that you know he does."

The two women had become pretty intimate together, as you may suppose, when they spoke like this,—that is to say, they had become intimate in a certain sense. They had seen each other every day for a period of two or three months, and the elder woman had by this time gained a very considerable influence over Gabrielle,—for Gabrielle was susceptible enough, self-willed as she was, to some influences, and the widow (so at least Helen and Aunt Susan said) had bewitched her. But, though these two months had made Mrs. Hill know a good deal about Gabrielle, they had for-

warded Gabrielle's knowledge of Mrs. Hill in only a very small degree indeed. That silent woman's history remained as dead a secret to her still as it had been on the day when they first met: she never talked of it to Gabrielle; never almost alluded to anything in her past life.

But yet, in her intercourse with the girl, she had thawed and softened since their first meeting in a very visible degree. It was evident that she liked her—probably she was grateful to her: she liked her well enough to smile at any sudden sight of the fair young face. Yet she never treated her when they were together as if they were on an equality, but rather, though there was so little difference in their ages, as if Gabrielle were a child whom she liked to be kind to, —whom she would take care of, if she could.

"My dear," she often used to call her. Sometimes she called her "Gabrielle," but Gabrielle had never yet addressed her by any other name than "Mrs. Hill."

The girl used often when she was passing the house to come in and sit in the widow's room for half an hour, and it was on one of these occasions that Mrs. Hill had said this thing to her about herself and Mr. Walkington.

"Is it true, as Mrs. Coulson tells me, that you are going to marry Mr. Walkington?" she had asked her; and then Gabrielle had broken out in the way that I have written above.

"No, I don't think there is anything on your part, but I think that he cares for you, and that you know he does," Esther had said.

And then Gabrielle had flushed up to the roots of her hair, and for a few moments she held her peace.

She was not sure at first whether to be angry and make no defence, or to think of what she could say for herself, and, in as plausible a way as she could, to say it. Her first impulse was to be silent and angry, but that yielded soon to the vain heart's instinctive desire to justify itself,—and so, after a little silence—

"I *don't* know that he cares for me—seriously," she said. "I am sure, at any rate, if he does, it isn't my fault. I can't help what people say, Mrs. Hill. Everybody in the parish may declare that I am going to marry him, but *he* knows very well that I am not."

"You can't be sure that he knows that."

"Why can't I be sure? Do you think that any body else knows as well as I do what—what he has cause to believe? I think that—perhaps—he is half in earnest—I will acknowledge that; but he knows, just as well as I do myself, that I have never, never, never had one serious thought about him! That is the whole truth. Now I have said more to you than I would say to anybody else, for I don't think anybody has a right to question me about him; but I don't want you to imagine that I am doing what I am not doing,—that I am encouraging him, or making him think I care a straw for him—when I don't," cried the girl, with the colour still burning in her face.

"If you don't care for him then why do you let him come about you as if he was

your lover? I have never thought that you cared for him," Mrs. Hill said gravely, "but I thought, and I think still, that you are acting wrongly. You are treating him as you do thinking that you can draw back at any moment. Oh, my dear, don't you know that a woman sometimes awakens all at once to find that she *cannot* draw back?"

It was not often that any tone of strong emotion came into Mrs. Hill's voice, but these last words were spoken almost with passion. Startled by her earnestness, Gabrielle was ready with no answer to her, and there were a few moments' silence, and then—

"I want to tell you something," the widow said again, but in her usual voice now. "I am afraid the telling of other people's

stories seldom does good, but yet I have been thinking over this thing, and it vexes me so that I want to warn you, and make you listen to me, if I can. Will you let me tell you about my own marriage?—You know," she said, before Gabrielle could reply to her—"you know I have never told you anything yet about my life at all,—because there are things that have happened to me that I cannot speak about; but my marriage is not one of these, and, though I should not care to have what I may tell you repeated to other people, yet I will tell you about it, if you like.—Shall I?" she said, and looked into the girl's face.

"You know I should like it," Gabrielle answered quickly.

"It is only a short story," she said; "but it began in this same way—my acquaintance

with my husband, I mean, was much such a one at first as this of yours with Mr. Walkington. I was very young—a good deal younger than you are, and I hardly knew what I was doing when I first let him come about me. I was thought to be pretty then, and I liked to be admired,—as you do now,—and he fell in love with me merely because I was pretty. He was a man—like Mr. Walkington too—who might easily have got some other girl to marry him, but he set his heart on marrying me, and, though I did not care for him, I was foolishly flattered by his love, and I let his attentions to me go on, week after week (I was not eighteen then, Gabrielle; I was hardly more than a child), till at last one miserable day some one whose judgment I depended on told me that I had compromised myself,

and that I could not refuse to be his wife. It was mistaken advice that was given me, my dear. I have thought that many a bitter time since,—but yet I had brought my trouble on myself, and I suppose I deserved to suffer as I did; for I had encouraged him out of vanity and idleness; I had never had one spark of love for him; I had done —what *you* are doing; and with me it did not end as in your case it *will* end, I suppose, by your throwing off your lover when you have played with him long enough. *I* was too young to dare to do that. If any creature had given help to me I might, but I had no help—and so at last I married him."

They had been sitting side by side while Mrs. Hill was speaking, with Gabrielle's eyes fixed in growing amazement on her

face. When she paused, as she did after these last words, the girl's bewilderment began to manifest itself in a sudden dropping out of disjointed sentences.

"But I don't understand—you don't mean surely—I always thought," she said—"I thought that you were so much attached to your husband?"

"Yes—I know you have thought that; and—do you see?" Mrs. Hill said quietly, "I have told you this partly to undeceive you, because, though I cannot tell you all the truth about me, at least I can do what I want most—I can prevent your believing a lie. No," she said in a low, cold voice, "I did not love my husband. I married him without love, and I lived with him without love for six years. All my married life was one long repentance of

what I had done. As I grew older I knew that, in spite of all that had been said to me, I had been wrong to marry him,—that I should have been wrong, let the pressure that had been brought upon me have been what it might: and, Gabrielle, if *you* needed any such advice, I would say to you—suffer anything rather than convert (as I did) what had begun by being merely a folly into a sin. Only I do not think you want advice of that kind—for you are not likely to sacrifice yourself. You are only likely to sacrifice Mr. Walkington.—You see," she added after a moment or two, "in a case of this sort some one must always suffer; in my case *I* suffered, because I was weak: in yours, you mean to throw whatever there may be to bear off your own shoulders,—

whenever the time shall come when you are tired of amusing yourself."

It was not the first occasion—though with respect to this especial matter it was the first—on which Esther Hill had spoken plainly to Gabrielle. She had told her some home truths before now, and Gabrielle had borne the telling of them from her lips with more patience than she would have done perhaps from the lips of any other woman. She would have been very angry just now if Aunt Susan or her sister Helen had made this speech to her that Mrs. Hill had made; but, as it was, she only coloured hotly, and looked half pathetic and half ashamed, and after two or three moments' silence—

"I think you are very hard to me—I don't think I deserve to be so spoken to,"

she said. "I am sure I never meant—Oh, Mrs. Hill, it is all such nonsense!—everybody knows that I don't mean anything! I am sure if I thought it was really wrong—But, you see, one gets so tired and stupid sometimes," the girl said half crying, "and it seems hard not to have something to amuse one."

"Does that seem hard to you? Ah, my dear, you had better bear it, however hard it seems," the widow said quickly. "Better live in total stagnation than amuse yourself by playing with men's hearts!"

And then there was a sudden pause, and Gabrielle sat looking at the sunshine and the flickering shadows of the leaves upon the floor, and there was no more said about Mr. Walkington. The silence lasted for several minutes, and during these minutes

Gabrielle's thoughts travelled away from her own misdemeanours back again to the story Mrs. Hill had told her, and at last abruptly she began once more to speak of it.

"I don't quite understand—Do you mean," she said in her amazed voice, "that you *never* got to care for him?"

The widow had been thinking her own thoughts too. She gave almost a startled look at Gabrielle's question.

"Are you speaking of my husband?" she said. And then after a moment—"No, I never got to care for him," she said in a cold suppressed voice.

"Was—was he not kind to you?"

"He was not *un*kind to me."

"And yet you never got to love him!"

This was said as a sort of ejaculation; and then Gabrielle began to look at the

shadows of the leaves again, and as she looked at them she thought to herself—"I suppose then that she loved somebody else—and that that is her secret!—somebody, very likely, who is married now, or perhaps dead, or perhaps has left off caring for her." And she was musing rather sentimentally over this new view of the case when the widow, as if she guessed what she was doing, quietly began to speak again.

"I do not want you to think that my life while I was married was harder than many another woman's," she said. "It was not that. It was only hard in the sort of way in which it would be hard to live always in the twilight when you loved the sunshine. Nobody was unkind to me; nobody gave me much to bear. If I had had a child I might even have grown happy. But I did

not deserve to be happy. I had done what I had no right to do, and my punishment—*then*—was not too great a punishment at all. It might have been infinitely greater if, not loving my husband, I had loved any one else better than him. But I never did that."

"Oh!" said Gabrielle involuntarily, half aloud, feeling as if she had received another shock,—for she had made out a second neat and plausible story for the widow, and this last sentence in a moment knocked it, too, to the ground. She looked into Esther's face, in a vain attempt to read the truth there. Most beautiful of marble faces it was,—like a statue's for its white, clear purity,—like a statue's, too, for its illegibility. She looked at it as she might have looked at a page of a book in a foreign

language, trying to decipher it in vain.

That day Gabrielle went home to Wrexham with her pretty little head full of many thoughts. Mrs. Hill's confidence had bewildered a good deal more than it had enlightened her, but still upon the actual facts that Esther had told her she pondered as she walked with a look of most unusual gravity and abstraction on her face. And, on the whole, these facts were rather painful to her, for in her heart Gabrielle loved romance, as most young creatures do, and the devoted attachment to her husband's memory with which she had till now accredited the widow had always lent a powerful interest to her in her eyes. A beautiful young creature breaking her heart for her husband's loss was an irresistibly affecting object, Gabrielle thought;

but a young widow breaking her heart *not* for her husband—that was a different sort of thing altogether.

And yet, though she had been shocked, and, upon one point at least, rather rudely enlightened, perhaps Mrs. Hill's influence over Gabrielle had never yet been so great as it was at this moment, for something that Esther had said before they parted had led to a little outburst of tenderness between them such as had never before taken place on any previous day.

"Will you go on liking me now?" the widow had suddenly asked her, before she went away, touching the girl's hand with one of hers, and looking into her face as she spoke with a little sad, pathetic smile. "I have startled you to-day, and put all the out pretty story that you had about me

of your head. Will you leave off caring for me now because I have told you the truth?"

There was a curious wistfulness in the woman's manner as she said this,—something that you would hardly have thought could have come out of her,—and yet, too, as she spoke so, you could have believed—or at least Gabrielle believed—that it *might* have been natural to her once; that all sorts of wistful, beseeching, pretty, playful ways had been possible and natural to her, in the days before her life had became frozen up.

"Will you leave off caring for me now?" she asked her; and Gabrielle, who was an unreasonable foolish young creature, instead of answering in a rational and sober way, chose to reply instead by putting both her

arms about the widow's neck, and bursting into an impetuous—

"No—no—I will never leave off!" and kissing her three or four times.

And then the two women sat for a little hand in hand, and Mrs. Hill said a few more words that Gabrielle remembered afterwards very vividly.

"If you were to turn away from me I should not complain," she said, "but I should feel it bitterly. Do you think, because I say so little, that I do not care for you? You came here and were kind to me when I had not a friend—when I was as lonely and forsaken a woman as there lived in this world. You have kept me from being utterly desolate—you and your people. Do you *think* I do not care for you?"

And then she took the girl in her arms

and kissed her, and sent her away with that embrace.

After which, as I said, Gabrielle went home to Wrexham, thinking of many things.

CHAPTER IX.

I AM afraid that, so far, I have scarcely made anyone feel that there was anything except folly in my poor Gabrielle,—and indeed, no doubt, there was folly enough in her, but still, in her slight way, she was not without a real sort of charm. She was so pretty and young and fresh, quick-witted enough too, good-tempered, full of kindliness. She took life, no doubt, very easily, like a bird or a butterfly; but, like the bird or the butterfly, she made a certain sweetness and brightness round her where she went. She was a little selfish, yet

in spite of that she was warm-hearted. She loved a few people, and would give up her own wishes not unfrequently to please them. She was a coquette by instinct, and indeed as quite a simple matter of course,—never having been able to understand all her life how a woman could be expected to be anything else. It was her natural destiny, Gabrielle thought, to have lovers, and her natural work to play with them,—though, of course, the play was to be harmless play, she always thought—or *said*, at any rate.

But, butterfly though she was, she was capable of being influenced by other people, in a way in which simple butterflies are not; and it is only just to her to record that after Mrs. Hill's appeal she became (though very much against the grain) more

circumspect by a good deal in her conduct towards Mr. Walkington than the expostulations of any other person had hitherto had the least effect in making her. She *wanted*, indeed, to go on playing with him (being an utterly idle creature) precisely in the same degree as she had done before; that is to say, having nothing to do for the greater part of every day, she would still have rather spent any given number of hours in amusing herself with Leigh Walkington than have spent them by herself—the excitement of that admirable diversion being just about sufficient to keep her while she was engaged in it from yawning. But yet, after Mrs. Hill had spoken to her she really did begin (bemoaning herself a good deal in consequence, it must be confessed) to take a little laudable pains to keep out of

Mr. Walkington's way. It was hard to have to do it, she thought, when she never meant any harm, and when every body flirted more or less; but still in her heart the girl cared more for Esther Hill than she did for Leigh Walkington; and so, though she grumbled, she did—in a certain degree at least—what Esther had asked her to do, and plumed herself not a little (for if she delivered herself up to self-sacrifice, she liked to provide some sweet by way of consolation) on the excellence of her behaviour.

But yet she was dull. A satisfied conscience is an excellent thing, but it hardly makes one merry, and Gabrielle might feel that she was doing right, and might—and indeed did—greatly admire her own magnanimity for so doing, but nevertheless she

found the days rather long, in spite of that. For, in fact, it was not easy—or at least it did not to her seem easy—to find amusement at Wrexham. There was, indeed, her Uncle Guy to entertain her, and she cared far more for her Uncle Guy than she did for Mr. Walkington; but Mr. Dunstan, you know, did not bestow quite an equal regard on her. She spent a good deal of her time with him, but she spent it so mainly—as she well knew herself—on sufferance. He did not love her particularly, nor desire her company: he only submitted to her, and acquiesced with good-humour when she imposed herself upon him.

"Come with me? Yes—come with me, if you like—if it will keep you out of mischief," he used to say to her sometimes when she offered, as she was in the habit of

doing, to accompany him in his walks or drives; and if she accepted these invitations —which, rough as they were, she usually did—she used to accept them with a sort of soreness, though at the same time not without a lurking half belief in her that, in spite of all unflattering speeches, her uncle at the bottom of his heart liked her company, and would rather have her pretty hand upon his arm, and her disturbing voice in his ears as he tramped along the country road than have taken his walks there in solitude. She even used to tell him so at times, and he would laugh at her in answer, and would never by any chance allow that she was right; but yet in a certain sense she *was* right, for the teazing presence of the girl had a sort of familiar pleasantness to him, so that probably, if she had come

about him less than she did of her own accord, he would have begun to call her to come, not because he particularly wanted her, but as he might have called some young pet puppy who was sure to be a torment and a charge to him in his walk from first to last, but yet whom nevertheless he would take with him, simply out of an instinctive kindliness of nature, and because the creature liked it.

So,—because Gabrielle liked it, and because the man, rough as he often was in speech, had a considerable tenderness of heart that made most of his acts the very reverse of rough or selfish,—he used to let her at her will attach herself to him, and fall into the habit of throwing herself upon him for companionship. They used to take many a walk together; he rode too, and

she used to ride with him. He let her do what she liked to a large extent, submitting to her feminine humours and unreasonablenesses of every sort with an imperturbable good-humour and indifference such as a rhinoceros might be supposed to show under a shower of small pebbles,—simply going his own way the while, and letting her whiz about him as she pleased.

And whiz about him she did, though his indifference sometimes made her sore,—for, unhappily, she had a way of taking offence when he preferred other people's company to hers, and he often preferred other people's company to hers. He would often when she went out with him call at the Gilberts' to try if he could get George Gilbert to accompany them in their walk; and she would always resent his doing this, and

would sometimes openly oppose it; but he would do it nevertheless.

"Why do you come if you don't like George Gilbert?" he would say to her. "I want to see him—but, if *you* don't, why don't you stay at home?"

But if, as happened once or twice, she, being hurt at the roughness of some such address, would make a feint (it was never much more than that) of letting him go without her, then that ready kindliness of nature of his would be pretty sure to make a quick amends for the rough speech, and—

"Come away!" he would call to her. "If you don't like George Gilbert you ought to be taught to like him. It will do you more good to hear what he says than to listen to what most other people say in the parish."

And so, under this educational pretext, he would draw the affectedly reluctant little hand into his arm, and would pat it perhaps when it had got there with a sort of reconciliatory half tenderness.

It was in this way that, as the summer went on, Gabrielle came to see a good deal of Mr. Gilbert,—though for the most part she saw him under protest. Not that she had any very strong objection to him, only she used to think he spoilt their walks. She thought this because she was not at ease with him, and did not know how to become at ease; and because at the bottom of her heart she was not quite sure that she would have liked to be at ease, even if she had known how. For at the bottom of her heart Gabrielle, like the majority of women, was an aristocrat, and she could not forget

the obtrusive fact of George Gilbert's birth. He might be what he liked intellectually, but socially he was old Gilbert the blacksmith's son, and not a gentleman born. And so, not being a gentleman born, she took it into her head that she did not know how to treat him. The ugly fact made her shy of him; it made her shrink from the thought of seeming to be on equal terms with him. She did not *want* to be on equal terms with him: she would have flushed all over her proud face at the thought of being intimate with him, or of treating him as she treated Leigh Walkington. He might be worth twenty Leigh Walkingtons, as she had once professed to believe that he was, but none the less for that would the foolish young heart have grown hot at the bare suspicion of being familiar with him, as she

was familiar with that very gentlemanly young clergyman.

She had thought to herself at first, when he began to take these walks with them, that the right manner for her to assume towards him would be a manner that was a little condescending, and so she had tried to be condescending; but somehow the attempt had not succeeded quite satisfactorily. The young man, indeed, was shy, but he had scarcely given any proofs of being humble (as Gabrielle at least would have understood humility.) When she had assumed her condescending manner he had not seemed very clearly to understand what she meant; he had in no wise appeared to be flattered by it. He had merely—as he might have done from any other slight, unintelligible thing,—turned aside from it

with an almost unconsciously visible indifference; and Gabrielle, finding her efforts failing so singularly to produce any kind of effect, had drawn back, a little mortified (though she would not have allowed that she was mortified), and, not quite knowing what course to pursue next, had somehow, instead of pursuing any, fallen back on something that, even on her part, was very like shyness too. For, if he would not be patronized (as it seemed that he would not), and, if she could not treat him as if he was her equal (as to her own mind seemed perfectly clear), how could she be at ease in her relations with him at all, or escape being troubled in his presence with a certain sense of awkwardness?

Though she saw a good deal of him, therefore, as the summer advanced, yet the

amount of communication that she had with him remained of the very smallest. It was a novel position to Gabrielle, and one that she scarcely relished, to find herself little more than an ornamental appendage to her uncle, as he and George Gilbert walked side by side, and talked together. They used to talk without either of them taking the slightest notice of her presence, and she often resented this; she was angry at it—it mortified and hurt the vain young heart. It was only now and then—attracted by something that would suddenly appeal to her, and rouse the better nature that existed in her, beneath all her folly and vanity and slightness—that she would for a few moments throw aside her own frivolous thoughts, and listen with a sense of pleasure to what they said. At these rare moments

she would sometimes almost forget that George Gilbert was her inferior, and that she did not like him. She would listen and be pleased to listen, and would occasionally have a vague notion that it did her good, and somehow lifted her above the foolish feminine world in which she mostly lived, into a purer and higher air.

But yet, none the less, did it seem impossible to her that she herself could talk to him as she might talk to anybody else.

"I shouldn't know what in the world to say to him. I haven't an idea what he would expect me to talk about," she would say to Miss Dunstan or her sister Helen. "What *can* a woman talk about to a man who doesn't belong to her own class?"

And then she would give a little puzzled shrug of her pretty shoulders, and would go

her way, thinking that she had asked a crucial question, and one that placed the whole difficulty of the case in a nutshell.

Yet was it of necessity so difficult a thing to find out how to talk to George Gilbert? For a good many weeks Gabrielle thought it was. One day—being suddenly induced to meet the difficulty full in the face—to her surprise she found its proportions scarcely so great as she had assumed and asserted beforehand that they were.

"My mother has been in bed for these last two days with a very heavy cold," Mr. Gilbert chanced to mention one afternoon.

"Oh! has she? I will go to see her," replied Gabrielle, quite simply,—for Gabrielle, in her character (which she liked to assume) of a beneficent superintendress of parish

matters, used to visit at many of the cottages in the village, and knew Mrs. Gilbert very well.

"I will go and see her to-morrow. I did not know anything about her being ill," said Gabrielle. And then next day she went to see her.

Mrs. Gilbert was a little better, and out of bed, and Gabrielle sat and talked with her for an hour, in the pleasant kindly way that, in such circumstances, was natural to her; for though she was a foolish girl, and given to trouble herself most unnecessarily with silly scruples about rank and position when she was with George Gilbert, who might claim to be on an equality with her, yet a pleasanter gossiper with old women was hardly to be found in the parish than Gabrielle Lynn, nor one who was more popular.

"She never seems to me to have a bit of pride in her," Mrs. Gilbert had said of her before now to her son; and although *his* experience of her would have led him to another sort of conclusion, Mrs. Gilbert from her point of view was not wrong.

She sat by the fire to-day, and chatted, and did the old lady good. At the end of an hour, just as she was going away, the house door opened, and George Gilbert came in, and, though she had already bidden Mrs. Gilbert good-bye, she had in courtesy to linger for an additional moment or two to speak to him.

Gabrielle and Mr. Gilbert rarely shook hands together (this was a bit of pride on his part), so as he came in and saw her he merely raised his hat.

"I have been sitting with your mother.

I am so glad to find that she is better to-day," said Gabrielle.

"Yes—she is a great deal better."

"It is such a lovely day—I think that must have done her good. Is it not warm?" said Gabrielle.

"Very warm indeed."

And then, as neither of them seemed to have any further remark to make, Gabrielle bade good-bye again to Mrs. Gilbert, and went towards the door.

"I am going to meet my uncle. I suppose you have not seen him to-day?" said Gabrielle, as the young man followed her to open it,—not that she cared in the least whether Mr. Gilbert had seen him or not, but simply because it was the only thing that she could think of to say.

"Yes—I overtook him in the road just

now. Where are you to meet him?"

"At Pearson's. He was to be there at five."

"It is not near five yet."

"Oh yes, it is." Gabrielle said this confidently, taking out her watch and looking at it as she spoke. "Five minutes to five."

"Is that what your watch says?" he asked her in rather an amused tone. "*I* make it twenty minutes past four."

"Oh!"—a little startled, and half incredulous.

"And I think I am right."

"Oh dear!—then something has gone wrong with this again!"—and she began to gaze in a vexed way at the pretty little golden plaything in her hand. "I don't know what is the matter with it; it is always going wrong now."

"Those very small watches rarely go right."

"This used to go right,—but it has taken to doing such odd things of late."

"Let me see it,"—and he took it from her.

"I am sure it ought not to be wrong, for Gibson had it for a fortnight not two months ago."

"If it has been in Gibson's hands,"—with a laugh—"I don't wonder that it goes wrong." He opened the watch, and looked at the works for a few moments. "I see what is the matter with it. If you will leave it with me I will set it right for you," he said.

"With *you?*" she exclaimed, and opened her eyes. And then—half hesitating—"Oh, but I couldn't give you so much trouble."

"It would be no trouble, for it is a kind of work that I am very fond of. But perhaps you would rather not trust it with me?" He said this, turning his face suddenly round to her.

"Oh, I did not mean that! Only—I did not know that you understood about watches?"

"I have always had a liking for most kinds of machinery."

"And can you take them to pieces? Would you have to do that to mine?"

"Yes—I would take a good deal of it to pieces."

"Oh!"—impulsively—"I should like to see you do it."

"If you chose to wait till five o'clock you might see me begin to do it now."

"Might I?"—a little dubiously. "Could

you begin to do it now? Would it not be inconvenient?"

"Not at all inconvenient."

"Then I *should* like it,—very much, if Mrs. Gilbert will let me stay," the girl said; and, while Mrs. Gilbert was expressing her satisfaction at this arrangement, her son began to get out his tools; and, before a couple of minutes had passed, placing a chair for Gabrielle, he had sat down without any further waste of time, and begun his work.

Their mutual position struck Gabrielle with rather a sense of comedy as she took her seat beside him. Perhaps for a few moments, as she found herself so suddenly pinned to the young engineer's elbow, she did not quite like it, and thought that their sitting together so was odd, and wished that

she had not said anything about wanting to watch him working; but after a little while she became interested enough in what he was doing to forget all that.

She knew nothing whatever about the structure of a watch (or about almost any thing else), and she began to get curious, and then to ask questions, more and more eagerly. As she sat so, thinking more of what she was watching than of herself, she lost much of her usual sense of shyness with him; he on his part, absorbed in his work, wholly lost his shyness with her. She stayed, looking and listening, and, in an odd kind of way, rather enjoying her unaccustomed position, —laughing at herself now and then inwardly for what she was doing, and yet feeling that on the whole she liked to do it,—that she liked, more than she would be-

forehand have believed that she could, to have the grave young engineer sit so and talk to her.

Not that she understood nearly all he said to her, for she was in a state of dense mental darkness as to all his special subjects beyond what a mind as full of them as his own could almost be supposed to credit, but she partially understood various small fragments of what he said, and his quiet assumption that she knew a score of things which she ought to have known and did not, though it put her to shame occasionally, and occasionally made her laugh, on the whole was pleasantly felt by her to be not a little flattering. For Gabrielle was a vain little soul, and in her heart of hearts loved to be thought too well of, and rated above her worth. She was so ignorant (though she

had native wit enough) that it flattered her to be believed to have a grain of knowledge,—as it flatters a plain woman when some rare admirer, seeing her perhaps in the twilight, thinks her pretty.

Mrs. Gilbert, sitting at the fireplace knitting stockings, addressed a few words to her son or to Gabrielle now and then, and the half hour that Gabrielle had to stay passed quickly.

At the end of it he looked at his watch, and told her—

"It is ten minutes to five."

"Oh, then, I must go," she said; and after a few moments she rose up, half reluctantly.

"It's pretty work, isn't it? You should come back and see him do the rest of it, Miss Gabrielle," Mrs. Gilbert said.

Her son was gathering his tools together, and did not second this invitation. Gabrielle stole a little half sly glance at him to see if he meant to second it; then, when he remained silent, with perhaps a momentary inward sense of disappointment—

"I am glad, at any rate, that I have been able to stay and see so much now," she said.

"Would you care to come again when I go on with it?" Mr. Gilbert asked her then, looking suddenly up, but speaking coldly enough.

"I don't know—I daresay we couldn't arrange a time. Oh no, I think you had better not mind me."

And Gabrielle, resenting the coldness a little, went up to the fireside to shake hands again with Mrs. Gilbert.

"I could go on with it at any time you liked."

This was said with a little more courtesy, and Gabrielle paused, and began to hesitate. After a moment—

"Could you?" she said, half doubtfully.

"If it suited you to come again about this time to-morrow; that is—" he added quickly—"if you would like to come."

"I *should* like to come."

"Then shall I wait for you?"

"Oh, no!" She made this response very eagerly. "Don't wait, because something might come in the way. But if you would settle to go on with it about four o'clock to-morrow, then you might just let me come, you know, if I could."

"Very well."

And then neither of them said any more, and Gabrielle bade good-bye to Mrs. Gilbert.

"I will open the gate for you," he said next moment; and they walked down the garden path together.

When they reached the gate, with a scarcely perceptible hesitation, she held out her hand to him. He had intended, and had even rather pointedly shown his intention, only to bow to her, but when she offered him her hand, though he was conscious of the hesitation with which it was done, he had no choice but to accept it. So he touched it, though coldly and proudly enough.

In another moment the church clock struck five, and she exclaimed quickly—"Oh, I shall be late!" and with a parting

smile to him, that hovered dubiously between cordiality and condescension, she hurried away.

"To go home, and repent," the young man said as he turned back to the house, with rather a scornful laugh; and he laughed again in much the same way a minute afterwards when his mother began to talk to him about Gabrielle, and to praise her to him for her pleasant simple ways.

"My dear, call her proud!" Mrs. Gilbert said. "You're ten times prouder than she is. I was vexed with you just now, George, when you wouldn't ask her to come back, —leaving your old mother to do it, and even then never saying a word."

"Why should I ask her to come back?" he replied to this reproach, giving as he spoke that rather bitter laugh. "She would

come if she wanted to do it without being invited. You need have been under no apprehension, mother. She has too keen an appreciation of the honour of her visits to have any hesitation about paying them. I am only sorry that in the end I said anything to her about coming again. It was a mistake.—It is not much matter, however, for she is very little likely to come."

But George Gilbert was wrong, for she did come. Perhaps she could hardly have quite told what made her walk to the blacksmith's cottage again on the following afternoon, for in her heart she too was a little vexed that anything had been said about her going back; she had begun to think again that this sitting by the young engineer's side had not been quite a dignified proceeding on her part. And yet she did not like

to break her engagement to go back, because somehow she had an instinctive feeling that, if she broke it, he would understand why she broke it, and she did not want him to understand. For though Gabrielle was proud enough to resent the assumption that George Gilbert was her equal, she had enough delicacy of feeling to make her shrink from the thought of openly doing anything that should seem to say to him that she did not consider him her equal, —and in his own house especially she shrank from the thought of doing such a thing.

So, to a certain extent unwillingly,—half angry with herself, and a little angry too with him, and yet remembering through it all that that half hour on the preceding day had been a pleasant one, and that, let

George Gilbert be what he liked, gentleman or blacksmith's son, he was a man worth talking to,—with this rather curious mixture of feelings she took her second walk to the Gilberts' cottage.

And perhaps, that day,—after she had sat for the second time beside him, and had watched him at his work, and listened and talked to him for an hour,—perhaps when she went away the young man felt less disposed than he had done on the previous afternoon to be contemptuous of her affability and courteousness.

"You must let me keep the watch for a few days to regulate it," he told her when he had got his work upon it finished; and he put it into his waistcoat pocket, and carried it about with him, and more than once while he retained possession of it he took it

out and looked at it, and touched the works again, and regarded the little plaything rather gently.

"Will you be able to make it go right, dear?" his mother asked him on one of these occasions, and he looked up from his occupation with a sudden smile.

"Ay, ay," he said; "I'll make it go right for her,—never fear."

CHAPTER X.

MRS. HILL'S time for going to Wrexham, you may remember, had been changed to three o'clock. She read to Helen from three to five: then came afternoon tea, and they almost always made her stay for this. Afternoon tea was always taken in the room where Helen chanced to be,—either in her own sitting-room, or in the drawing-room, and wherever she was such of the others as were at home at the time used to gather. In these hot summer days it was not very often that Aunt Susan or Gabrielle about that hour chanced to be

out, but Mr. Dunstan was from home not unfrequently. Yet tolerably often too he also was one of the party who came to drink tea, and on the average he used to see Mrs. Hill for a few minutes some two or three times a week.

They did not take very cordially to one another. Mrs. Hill, who had become by this time pretty much at ease with the other members of the family, nearly always in Mr. Dunstan's presence resumed her cold and reserved manner. She would sit almost silent while the others talked, and it was always she who, on the days when he was with them, broke the little party up by making the first move to go.

"I wish you would let me leave you when your uncle comes," she had said frankly to Helen once. "When he comes

here he likes to be happy, as a man is with his own belongings round him. I am nothing but a disturbing element,—and such a useless one, you see."

But Helen would not listen to her, nor permit her to go; and when what she had said was repeated (it was Helen herself who repeated it) to Mr. Dunstan, he heard it merely with a laugh.

"A disturbing element, does she call herself?" he said. "Well, I can't say that she disturbs me. If she does anything, it is rather the reverse of that. Her fault is that she is too much of a composing element. And, as for being useless,—well, in the utilitarian sense of the word every work of art is useless, but we are not utilitarians here. Doesn't she know that she is good to look at?"

But still, as far as holding any special communication with her went, it remained true that Mr. Dunstan did not seem to be much drawn to Esther.

One day, however, he said to her when she was about to take her leave—

"Are you going home? I have to go your way, so we may as well walk together, mayn't we?"—and the proposition was made so suddenly that, having no time to frame an objection, she was startled into a forced compliance with it.

"If you like," she said after a moment's silence; and though he might have seen, and probably did see, that she would rather have gone alone, he at once accepted her unwilling permission, and in a couple of minutes they were walking together to the gate.

He began almost at once to talk to her in an easy pleasant natural way. He was a man fond of talking—one who at most times preferred talk to silence—who rarely had difficulty in talking to anyone, whether man, woman, or child. On the few occasions hitherto when he had been alone with Esther (shy of him as she was in a general way) he had managed to make these interviews not silent interviews by any means, and as they walked along the road together he was not silent, nor did he let her be silent now.

He fell to talking to her about Helen. In the estimation of many people Helen Lynn was hardly a loveable woman; her illness had sharpened and soured her, and made her on the whole not comfortable to live with; but her uncle loved her, and

never thought of her or spoke of her without tenderness. He was so tender over her, and so sorry for her, that her faults of temper never vexed him as they vexed other people. He never said a quick word to her, nor resented a sharp word that she said to him, nor failed in his constant patience with her.

He had never spoken to Esther about her before this, and she had hardly hitherto known how near his heart the girl was. His voice grew gentle and full of feeling now as he talked of her. "She has so much more to suffer than any of the rest of us; I cannot bear that we should ever forget that," he said. "All this illness of hers has been so much harder for her than it might have been for many a one—or than it might be even for her in another place,

where she could have more to occupy her than she has here. I am more grateful than I can tell you to anyone who ever brings a fresh interest into her life. *You* have done that, you know," he said, and suddenly turned his face to her, "and I have never yet thanked you for it."

"Oh, but you must not speak of thanking me," Esther replied to this quickly and eagerly.

"Why must I not?" he immediately asked.

"Think of how little I can do, and of all that they have done for me! Think how good they have been to me!" she said, with something of a quiver in her voice.

"They have grown fond of you—that is all."

"But they were not fond of me at the beginning."

And then, when he did not answer this at once—

"Do not speak again of thanking me for anything I may ever do for them," she added earnestly. "I have received ten times more from them than I can ever repay. They were kind to me when I was without a friend: they helped me when I did not know where to look for help; above all, they *trusted* me," she said, and all at once she turned her face to him with a look of intense and even passionate feeling that came over it like a flash of light—"and that I shall never forget!"

"They did right to trust you," he answered quietly.

She was still looking at him as he said this, and at the words the grey eyes opened wider, as if in surprise; and then suddenly

she could not answer him, for they had got brimful of tears.

They walked on together for a little after this without speaking again. He said no more about Helen. They were coming near to Mrs. Coulson's cottage, and if she had chosen she might perhaps have remained silent for the short remainder of the way they had to go together; but these last words of his had moved her, and though she had not been able to reply to them at once, because she could not trust her voice to do it steadily, yet she wanted to reply to them, and when she was almost at the cottage door she forced herself, though not without an effort, to do it.

"I am too grateful—to all of you—to be able to speak about my gratitude," she abruptly said in a low voice; "only I

should like you to understand that at least I feel how good you are to me,—for I know, instead of trusting me, how natural it would be if you were to believe that a woman who shrinks from speaking of her former life has some bad cause for being silent about it."

"I don't see that," he said bluntly.

"Do you not?" Her eyes were humid still as she hurriedly raised them up to him.

"As a matter of course, certainly not," he said. "I think it is a great misfortune for a woman to have a secret in her life, but it would be a very unfair thing to condemn her on such a ground."

"You are very good to me to say that," she said in a low voice.

And then, after two or three moments' silence—

"I think that all the cruelty of the world came to me early," she all at once went on, in a tone that was tremulous with emotion, "and that now I am finding nothing but its goodness. You make me feel as I think of old poor creatures fresh from the rack would have felt if someone had come to them and touched them with a soft hand. What can I say to you? What can I do to show how I thank you?"

They had fairly reached the end of their walk now, and with these last words of hers had come to a stand beside the cottage gate. He answered her before he lifted the latch.

"You might show that you trusted *me* a little more. That's what you might do," he said with a frank laugh.

"I do trust you," she said.

But she understood what he meant, and she made her answer rather faintly.

"You don't seem to do it. I should say you regarded me as a sort of ogre, with whom it was not quite safe to be on speaking terms."

"Mr. Dunstan—!" she said.

"You know you never like to be in the same room with me."

"Oh, it is not that!"

"It is something very like that."

"You know why I go away. You know that I would not do it if I did not feel how worse than useless I always am where people want to be merry together."

"That is a morbid feeling; you shouldn't encourage it. Besides, why do you assume that we always want to be merry?"

"I will not say merry, if you do not

like the word,—but I mean that you like to be all happy and at ease with one another."

"When only my sister and my nieces are at home, however, this idea of *them* being at ease with one another, I observe, does not seem to trouble you much?"

She coloured when he said this, and made no answer for a moment; then hesitating, and almost in a tone of deprecation—

"It matters less with them: besides—they are so good," she said.

"And I am *not* good?"

It was rather an odd thing that Mr. Dunstan should choose Esther Hill out of all women in the world to teaze and drive into a corner in this way; and yet, as he stood there leaning against the gate, he seemed perfectly at ease in doing it, and the face that was so fixed and stern to other peo-

ple had got flushed and mobile while he talked to her,—flushed with warm human blood, and made beautiful and womanly,—like what it had been long ago, probably, before the weight and horror of her bitter secret had taken the light out of it. Mr. Dunstan stood with his hand upon the gate, barring the entrance till he chose to open it for her, and as he stood so he scarcely moved his eyes away from it.

"And I am *not* good?" he had said.

Upon which their eyes met, all at once,—hers wistful and almost appealing, his with a good deal of laughter in them.

"You know I do not mean that," she said.

And then, after a moment's silence, as if yielding to a strong impulse—

"After all your kindness—after what

you have said to-day,—do you *think* I could mean that?" she said.

"Well, I won't think you mean it if you show me that you don't,—but hitherto you have *forced* me to think it, you know," he answered. And then with a laugh he raised himself, and lifted up the latch. "Good-bye. I am going to your next-door neighbour. You don't know him—do you?" he added as he held out his hand to her, in rather a sudden, quick way.

"Mr. Gilbert? No; I have merely seen him going about the garden here," she answered carelessly.

"You don't remember ever meeting him any where else, then? Because he fancies that he has seen you somewhere before."

"That he has seen *me*!" she said.

The words were natural enough, but she

did not say them as any one else in the circumstances might have done, in a tone of slight surprise or indifferent inquiry, but almost with a gasp,—with the blood, too, rushing in crimson to her face, and a look in her eyes—for a moment, until she regained self-possession enough to control it—almost of terror.

Mr. Dunstan was a tolerably cool man, but he was startled by the effect he had produced in no small degree. He was so surprised at this sudden and violent evidence of emotion that it made him, in fact, for a few seconds forget his own business of replying to her. Two or three moments had passed before he said in as indifferent a tone as he could assume—

"Yes—he seems to think your face is familiar to him. I suppose it is not so un-

likely that he may have met you somewhere? He has been about the world a good deal."

"I do not think he can ever have seen me."

She did not say this excitedly, but in a faint quick voice, as some one might speak who had had a shock that had taken her breath away.

"Well, he may be wrong, you know; very likely he is wrong. It may only be that you are like some one else. Of course one makes mistakes of that kind often enough," Mr. Dunstan said good-naturedly. "I thought that possibly you might recollect *him*. It is curious sometimes how we seem to recognize a face that we have really never seen in our lives before. I have known it happen many a

time." (He said all this while she stood motionless, and all the time he was speaking he was thinking to himself quite other thoughts from those he was expressing,—thoughts that had a good deal of wonder in them, and a great deal of kindness and compassion.) "I must not keep you standing here, however," he said after a moment's silence. "You are going in, are you not? Good-bye again."

And then he shook hands with her (she merely mechanically and half inaudibly echoing his "good-bye,") and they parted, and she went up the garden path into the house, like some one stunned or in a dream.

"What shall I do if he has seen me? O God, what shall I do?" were the first words she cried passionately to herself, as

soon as she had closed the door of her room, and was alone there with her sudden fear. She threw off her bonnet and shawl, and sat down and tried to think. The shock had come so suddenly that it had almost stupefied her.

"If he ever really saw me before, some day he will remember where it was," she began to say to herself presently,—"some day, sooner or later, and then—then, he will tell it to the others, and I shall be driven away. What shall I do to keep him from telling it? Ought I to go away before anybody can know it? Oh, I do not want to go away!" she cried. "It would be better to stay, and bear everything, and die here, rather than be hunted like a wild creature from place to place. I *cannot* do that! I cannot go from the only spot in

all the world in which there seems to be some little human warmth."

With her heart throbbing and aching she sat all through the summer evening thinking what she should do. If what Mr. Gilbert had said was true, one of three things she must do, as it seemed to her; she must go away (but she said she could not go away), or she must stay and face the consequences of having her story known (and how could she find strength to do that?), or she must speak to George Gilbert, and make an appeal to him, from the thought of which her very soul shrank. To resign the rest that she had found, or to run the risk of everyone coming to know what she was struggling so desperately to conceal, or to tell her fear to a stranger and throw herself upon his mercy—one of these things she

had to do. Which of them should she do? —which of them would be least impossible?

They all seemed *barely* possible; but at last she said to herself that she would speak to George Gilbert. She said—"If he is as good as they say he is, he will have pity on me. He will not drive a miserable woman who appeals to him from the only refuge that she has." And when she thought this she felt comforted. But then, almost in the next moment, came this other thought—"Suppose he were to think it right to make me go? Suppose, for the Dunstans' sake, he were to think it his duty to tell the truth to them?" And then the unhappy woman bent down her face upon her knees, with a bitter, broken-hearted burst of tears.

But still in the end she returned again to her first decision, and said that she would speak to George Gilbert. Let the worst that was possible come from that—let her find that he knew her secret, and that he would not keep it—even then, terrible as it would be, it would be less terrible than to live day after day, and week after week, with the fear of discovery hanging over her; to live, watching George Gilbert's face, which she feared even already, and watching the others' faces, which she loved now, and did not fear yet, but which she *should* fear then with a constant sickening miserable dread of the coming of the hour when they should begin to change to her. "They trust me now," she said to herself, "but how could any of them trust me if a stranger were to tell my story to them?

How could they do it, even if I were to tell it to them myself? Ah, this is the misery of it—this is the cruelty worse than all the rest! I think I could go and cry it all aloud from the housetop if, by doing that, out of all the crowd who would stand round and shake their heads at me, I could find one creature who would believe me. But I should not!—not one who would trust me as other women are trusted. Those four would try, I think, for a little while; but they might try with their whole hearts to do it wholly—and they *could* not do it."

It had seemed to this poor soul during these last quiet weeks as if, after all that she had suffered, there had opened to her in this place a hope, which was like a salvation to her, of rest and peace. If you knew what she had gone through you

would be able to understand the utter faintness of heart with which she tried to face the thought that this hope, so lately gained, was already perhaps about to be taken from her; that, weary and desolate as she came, she was about to be driven once more from this place that had been so kind to her. Once, as she sat thinking with impotent misery of the past, and with passionate pain of the present, her power of endurance failed her, and she cried out bitterly—"What have I done that God should make me suffer like this? He punishes me as Cain was punished. I was beginning to believe again in His justice—but now I do not believe in it any more! He has treated me all along as a cruel man might treat me—not as if He was God, who knew!" She said this with the wild passion

of a woman become almost desperate—with the bitterness of a forsaken woman who felt that God and man alike had joined together against her, to crush her. It was not the first time that she had believed this; she had been desperate enough and faithless enough on other days than this one—more desperate even than she was now. "If I can but stay and rest here—if God will but let me stay here!" she began to sob pitifully at the last.

It seemed so small a thing to ask—only the boon of a little peace and rest—the hope of not being hunted like a wild creature. She looked so utterly weary and heart-broken as she sat there all alone, with eyes—that saw nothing that they rested on—stretching out into the growing darkness, that you might well have thought the hard-

est hearted human being would have been moved to some sort of pity at the sight of her—if it had been only to so much pity as to make him drop the stone he might have meant to throw at her as he passed by. And yet did God mean to be even so merciful as that?

She had finally resolved before the morning came that she would speak to George Gilbert. She was aware that by speaking to him she might possibly be doing what there was no need to do; for was it not likely enough that he had had very little meaning in what he had said?—that, struck (as Mr. Dunstan had suggested) by some casual resemblance in her face to the face of some other woman, he might merely have thought for a moment that he had seen her before, and have really never seen her? She felt that this was

not improbable, but yet (though once or twice she said yearningly to herself—"May I not trust to its being so, and do nothing?"—) she knew that the risk of doing nothing was a risk she did not dare to run. Bitter as it would be to her, she must humble herself to George Gilbert, for she could regain her peace in no other way. She might not regain it even in that way—that she knew; but at least her only hope lay in trusting to him.

She said to herself that if it was possible she would speak to him before she saw the Dunstans again, for she felt as if she had no courage to meet them till she had done all that was in her power to keep her secret from reaching their ears; and when her mind was once wholly made up she even sat trembling with feverish, irrepressible

eagerness and desire to have the thing done at once;—for what might not an hour's delay do? she thought,—might not one hour lost make it too late?

"I must go to him, wherever I can find him alone, and ask him to listen to me," she said to herself. "It is no use to think of the misery of it. I think I would rather put my hand into the fire than speak to him, and yet I *must* speak."

She dressed herself early in the morning in her walking-dress, and then sat down beside one of the windows in her parlour. She knew that in all likelihood she should not have to wait there long before she saw young Gilbert; and she was right, for soon after she had taken her seat he came out from the house. But for a long time after that she was kept sickening with suspense

while he lingered about the place, nailing up a creeper round the porch, doing some bit of carpentry for his mother, reading his newspaper in the sunshine. The young man often used to go out early, but to-day he seemed to have no business to take him out. His intention seemed to be to spend his morning at home idly; so she wearily thought, as she sat watching him through that long hour and a half before at last her heart sprang to her lips as she saw him throw his paper aside, and walk down the garden path to the little gate.

Her plan was to follow him whenever he should leave the house, and go straight to him and address him; and she did this. Happily for what she wished, when he reached the road he turned his back upon the village, and it was in a very quiet place,

where there were few houses and few passers-by that she spoke her first words to him.

He had gone only a little way, but he had left the cottage before she had, and she had had almost to run to overtake him. He was still a few steps ahead of her when she first addressed him, saying his name in a quick nervous voice.

He turned at once, and recognized her with a look of evident surprise. As he stood still, and raised his hat, she came up to him.

"Will you let me speak to you for a few moments?" she said.

"Certainly," he replied. And then, half hesitating—"Shall I turn back with you?"

"No, no," she said quickly; "if you will allow me I will just walk with you a little

way." And then they went on, side by side.

She was a woman whose acquired, if not whose natural, self-possession was very great,—so great that even when deeply moved it rarely altogether left her. When it was of little comparative consequence whether she preserved composure or not, Esther Hill sometimes let go the strain and broke down, but she never broke down in the important moments of her life. Her voice trembled as she began to speak to Mr. Gilbert now, but that was the only sign of weakness that she showed. Her whole soul was shrinking from the task that she had set herself to do, but she did it nevertheless, and in clearer and simpler words than many women would have used.

"I know you will be surprised at what I

am going to say," she began, "but I am forced to speak to you by something that Mr. Dunstan told me yesterday. He told me you had said to him that you thought you had seen me somewhere else than here."

She paused when she had got to this point, and suddenly, with a look whose intense eagerness was wholly unintelligible to Mr. Gilbert, lifted her eyes up to his face. As she seemed to wait for a reply he answered her.

"I believe I did say to Mr. Dunstan that your face seemed to me like a face I had seen before, but I have not been able to recollect—"

"You have not?" she interrupted him, with the blood rushing to her cheek.

"No, I cannot remember where I may have seen you," he said. "Perhaps my im-

pression of having ever seen you anywhere else is only imaginary. I hope," said the young man, looking at her, and entirely perplexed by what these questions meant,—"I hope that nothing of any consequence depends upon my recollection of whether I have ever met you or not?"

"Yes, something does depend upon it," she replied quickly. "In one sense at least something depends upon it. I do not want you to remember where you may have seen me before—I hope you never have seen me at all,—but if it should be otherwise, there is a request that I am going to make to you. Will you earn the deepest gratitude of a friendless woman by promising me that you will tell no creature in this place anything that you may come to recollect about me?"

She was prepared for his look of blank

surprise as she asked him this, and for the sudden suspicious glance he gave her, as if he doubted whether she were sane. She had known beforehand that he would look at her so,—that anyone would have looked at her so to whom she had made a similar request. It was natural that he should think her mad,—or something worse.

"Wait a minute before you answer me," she said quickly, forcing herself to go on speaking. "Before you say either Yes or No to me let me tell you—as far as I can—why I ask you this. I am driven to ask it, because I can only remain in this place—or in any place—so long as the story of my past life is unknown. I am obliged to tell you this plainly. I have come here for shelter because—for no fault of mine—I have suffered a most bitter and cruel sorrow.

Do you see—I can look in your face, and repeat—'for no fault of mine.' If it were otherwise I should have no right to ask you what I am doing. But I have been punished for no sin of mine, and therefore —because I am a woman who has suffered unjustly almost more than I have had strength to bear,—because I have come here to find resignation, if I can,—to find something like forgetfulness and peace,—because, if you drive me away, I am so weary and heart-broken that you will do something more cruel than if you killed me—for all these reasons, though I am a stranger to you, and though I can understand what you must think of such a request, I dare to ask you to have pity on me, and —if it should be in your power to do it—not to tell my story."

She had spoken at first with a flush upon her face, but that flush had gradually died away, her emotion as she went on speaking giving this special sign of intensity, that every drop of blood, as if in an agony, passed gradually away from both cheek and lip. Only the dark grey eloquent eyes that had fixed themselves on the young man's face seemed to have life left in them when she became silent.

He had been thinking to himself, as most people in the circumstances would have thought—"She must be out of her mind;" and his first impulse when she paused was to say to her kindly and soothingly—

"I assure you I know nothing about you that I could by possibility repeat. I hope you will not distress yourself further by any fears of this sort. I really do not know in

the least whether I have ever seen you in any other place than this, but it is most unlikely that, even if I should have done so, the remembrance of where I had happened to meet you should teach me anything whatever about your history. It is wholly unlikely; pray believe that."

"No, it is *not* unlikely," she replied.

And then they walked on for a few steps in silence before, with a sad sort of patience in her voice, she began to speak again.

"You think I am mad," she said. "Yes —you need not say anything—I know you think that, and I do not wonder at it. I will not even dispute with you about it, if only you will give me your promise to do what I ask;—for I think that if you give your promise you will keep it—even to a mad woman," she said sadly and half bitter-

ly. "Look—I ask you just for one thing—to promise me that if you ever come to learn, or to remember, what my story is, you will tell it to no one here. Mr. Gilbert, will you do this?"

"I hardly think that you are justified in trying to extract such a promise from me," the young man said with some uneasiness. "It is possible that there may be circumstances——"

"I will ask you for something less then," she interrupted him quickly. "Promise me only that, if you are ever tempted to tell my story, you will give me warning before you do it."

He hesitated again. "I think even yet you ask too much," he said,—"too much, that is, if there is anything at all in what you have been saying. Suppose I were to

learn your story, how can I tell what sudden occasion for telling it might arise? I will promise you one thing, if you like—I will promise you never to tell it, *unless* such an occasion should arise (supposing that it should ever be in my power to tell it at all), without giving warning to you."

"If you do that, that will satisfy me. I may trust you then? you promise me that?" she said eagerly.

"Yes—if you wish it,—I promise that."

"Then I need not trouble you any longer."

And she stopped suddenly in the path; but when she stood still, before she left him, she looked into his face with her sad, passionate eyes, and—

"Do you think that it has not been an agony to me to ask you this?" she said

abruptly. "If I could have done anything else—anything at least that would have been less bitter—do you think that I would not rather have done it? But I did not know what to do; my choice lay between appealing to you and going away,—and I had no place to go to. You say you could not injure me because you do not know my story; well—thank God that you do not know it! But how could I reckon on your not knowing it before I spoke to you? How can I tell even yet that you may not find out that you know it at any moment? Have pity on me!" she cried suddenly—"if it is only for this thought,—that I have had to humble myself so to you,—and that I am a proud woman!"

"I do pity you," he said gravely.

And then, after a moment's silence—

"I hope you will believe," he added, "that the last thing I should wish to do would be, by any act of mine, to add to what you may already have suffered. It is very unlikely ever to be in my power to do that, but, even if he should be, you may trust me that I will not do it willingly."

He held out his hand to her as he said these last words, and as she gave him hers there came for the first time a look of softness into her face, and even something like moisture into the strained eyes.

"You are very kind to me. God reward you for your kindness!" she said.

And then they shook hands in silence and parted. She turned away homewards; he continued his walk.

"I *have* seen her before. Where could it possibly have been?" he said to himself.

He walked on, thinking over what she had said to him,—racking his memory in a vain effort to fix this wandering recollection,—this vague past vision of the woman's face, and connect some place or circumstances with it. For a long time he tried in vain; but he succeeded at last, and his success affected him in a way for which—curious as he had become over the matter—he had been little prepared.

"Good God!" he cried, standing still suddenly on the road, with the blood flushing up into his face.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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